IN EXTREMIS: Communal Expressions of Serious Impoverishment in the Dominions of the Kings of England, 1250–1450

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Abstract: This article focuses on how communities in later medieval England claiming serious impoverishment articulated their plight to those they thought might be able to help through petitions to the king’s government. Using the 454 petitions, mainly in French, submitted to the king’s government between 1250 and 1450 citing substantial communal impoverishment, three main groups of petitioners are examined: secular communities, religious houses, and wider groupings of the population. While these petitions make up only a fraction of all surviving petitions from the later Middle Ages (2.59% of the 17,514 Special Collections 8 Ancient Petitions), they not only embody the most important communal requests for serious need to the king’s government from all such petitions but also represent a significant proportion of the populace as a whole and account for many of the most important communities under the English king’s control. Indeed by focusing on communities rather than individuals, a clearer sense should emerge of how medieval people understood, if not usually articulated, key aspects of their own common good in extremis — rather than how those with power defined it for them. Also by looking beyond England to those lands under the English monarch’s control from Ireland to southern France, we can see how communities on the very fringes of royal power viewed the English government’s role toward them. Overall this article illuminates how medieval communities claiming to be in or moving toward extreme need saw themselves and/or wanted others to see them, the reality of the situation where known, what petitioners thought was the best way forward, and the royal government’s reaction to such requests.

Keywords: medieval England, poverty, petitions, monarchy, secular, religious

Résumé : Le présent article examine la façon dont les communautés de l’Angleterre de la fin du Moyen Âge aux prises avec la grande pauvreté exprimaient leur situation aux personnes dont elles estimaient qu’elles pourraient les aider en faisant parvenir leurs requêtes au gouvernement du roi. Faisant fond sur les 454 requêtes, essentiellement en français, adressées au gouvernement du roi entre 1250 et 1450 faisant état de la grande pauvreté des communautés, cet article examine trois catégories de requérants : les communautés laïques, les maisons religieuses, ainsi que de vastes groupes de populations. Bien que ces requêtes ne représentent qu’une infime part de l’ensemble des requêtes de la fin du Moyen Âge disponibles (2, 59 % des 17 514 requêtes rassemblées dans le catalogue Special Collections 8 Ancient Petitions), elles constituent non seulement les requêtes communautaires les plus importantes relatives à la grande pauvreté adressées au gouvernement du roi, mais elles
représentent également une grande majorité de la population dans son ensemble, ainsi que de nombreuses communautés parmi les plus importantes placées sous l’autorité du roi anglais. En effet, en mettant l’accent sur les communautés plutôt que les individus, cette publication entend favoriser une meilleure compréhension de la façon dont les populations médiévales appréhendaient, voire exprimaient généralement, les aspects clés de leur propre bien commun in extremis — plutôt que la façon dont les détenteurs du pouvoir le définissaient pour eux. De plus, en dépassant le simple cadre de l’Angleterre pour examiner les territoires contrôlés par le monarque anglais, de l’Irlande au Midi, nous pouvons comprendre la façon dont les communautés vivant en marge du pouvoir royal percevaient les responsabilités du gouvernement à leur égard. De façon générale, cet article entend apporter des éclairages sur la façon dont les communautés médiévales s’estimant en situation de grande pauvreté, ou sur le point d’y basculer, se percevaient et /ou voulaient être perçus des autres, la réalité de la situation, lorsqu’elle est connue, ce que les requérants estimaient être la meilleure voie à suivre, ainsi que la réaction du gouvernement à l’égard de ces requêtes.

Mots-clés : L’Angleterre médiévale, pauvreté, requêtes, monarchie, laïc, religieux

Poverty takes many guises. One can be poor of money, poor of land, poor of health, poor of spirit. However most of the time when we hear of those in need in the Middle Ages, we hear of institutions and individuals helping those less fortunate and how they defined and responded to their plight — rather than from those claiming to be struggling themselves. From Orme and Webster to Rawcliffe,¹ often the sense has been that we should focus mainly on those giving, rather than those being given to, to understand medieval poverty and hardship. Over the past few decades however there has been a gradual if sporadic shift to looking in a more focused manner from the side of the recipients — though until relatively recently mainly examining continental evidence.² This article makes the case for continuing to reverse the image for later medieval England, concentrating on how communities — mainly towns (including cities), villages, and religious houses claiming serious need — articulated their plight to those they thought might be able to help through petitions to the king’s government.

¹ See for example Nicholas Orme and Margaret Webster, The English Hospital, 1070–1570 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Carole Rawcliffe, “A Crisis of Confidence? Parliament and the Demand for Hospital Reform in Early-15th and Early-16th-Century England,” Parliamentary History 35 (2016): 85–110. Thanks to the creators of the National Archives (TNA)’s Ancient Petitions website, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>, and the University of Leicester’s research leave scheme.

² See for example Sharon Farmer, Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology and the Daily Lives of the Poor (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Anne Scott, ed., Experiences of Charity, 1250–1650 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015).
These petitions did not simply seek to alleviate the loss of material comfort or lucrative rights for the present or future. Claims of serious poverty and hardship are defined in the following study as needs that, if unfulfilled, had the potential to threaten the continuation of the community involved and/or its abilities to live up to its key obligations (for example feudal dues, taxes, care for the poor/sick). They are the issues for which the petitioners could usually not find help elsewhere (for example in the judicial system), and the king and his administration were often seen as a court of last resort.

The more general issue of poverty was of course open to considerable debate in the later Middle Ages. For a start there was the Poverty Controversy and in particular the question of Christ’s poverty, a prominent issue by the early fourteenth century and one that would impact both on how the Church viewed itself and its own wealth and how others in society viewed the Church. In a more practical vein there was the shift from indiscriminate giving to masses of poor in the High Middle Ages to the later medieval differentiation between deserving and undeserving poor. The era of feeding crowds of paupers at large events (such as weddings, funerals), in other words, gradually — if somewhat erratically — shifted to more focused charity toward identified individuals. The late fourteenth-century tract *Piers Plowman* was particularly articulate when it came to ideas — if sometimes contradictory — of discriminating charity, thereby showing their currency with the wider public.

A similar shift in tone toward poverty comes down from the highest levels, in particular the royal government. For example the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers (1349, 1351), sumptuary legislation (for example 1363), and the Statute of Beggars (1388) and various reissues of the same all placed severe limitations on the activities of the poor, from controls on movement and wages to dress and diet — limitations that notably could work in the interests of villagers as well as larger landowners. While

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3 For poverty and begging from religious and secular viewpoints see Elaine Clark, “Institutional and Legal Responses to Begging in Medieval England,” *Social Science History* 26.3 (2002): 456–463.

4 Patrick Nold, *Pope John XXII and his Franciscan Cardinal: Bertrand de la Tour and the Apostolic Poverty Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

5 Though this distinction dates back; see Anne Scott, “Experiences of Poverty,” in *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France*, ed. Anne Scott (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 14.

6 Anne Scott, *Piers Plowman and the Poor* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004); Anne Scott, “‘Nevere noon so nedy ne poverer deide’: Piers Plowman and the Value of Poverty,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 15 (2001): 13; Margaret Kim, “Hunger, Need, and the Politics of Poverty in Piers Plowman,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002): 165–166.

7 Elaine Clark, “Institutional and Legal Responses,” 463–464; Lawrence Poos, “The Social Context of Statute of Labourers’ Enforcement,” *Law and History*
these changes were mainly aimed at individuals rather than communities, the general mentality toward poverty and aid also influenced the treatment of provision at a communal level. In particular such ideas connected with the debate as to whether the medieval hierarchy was more interested in alleviating or eliminating poverty, whether movement toward the latter idea had to wait until the rise of the so-called Tudor Welfare State, and how such ideas played out in the king’s financial and material relationships with secular and religious communities. Finally the concept of the common good is notable here, in particular the relationship between the good of the giver and the good of the recipient but more generally the relationship between the utilitas to society, the bonum of society, and self-interest. These petitions (and responses from the royal government), as we will see, if not usually expressing such ideas outright were nonetheless working through such concepts in their own articulation of the issues they faced.

Using the 454 communal petitions, mainly in French, submitted to the king’s government between 1250 and 1450 citing substantial impoverishment, this article examines three groups of petitioners: towns and villages, religious houses, and wider groupings of the population. While such requests make up only a small percentage of surviving petitions from the later medieval period (2.59% of 17,514 Special Collections SC8 petitions), not only do they represent the most serious appeals for need to the king’s administration, but they represent a considerable proportion of the population as a whole and account for many of the most important communities under the English monarch’s power. Indeed by concentrating on communities rather than individuals, a clearer idea should emerge of how medieval people understood if not usually expressed their own common

Review 1 (1983): 52. The village community’s importance is emphasized in Christopher Dyer, “Poverty and Its Relief in Late Medieval England,” Past & Present 216.1 (2012): 72–78.
8 Paul Slack, Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England (London: Longman, 1988).
9 See for example Christopher Fletcher, “Virtue and the Common Good: Moral Discourse and Political Practice in the Good Parliament, 1376,” in Charisma and Religious Authority: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Preaching, 1200–1500, ed. Katherine Jansen and Miri Rubin (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010), 197–214; see also generally Matthew Kempshall, The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).
10 SC8 is not the only TNA class including petitions to the government but it usually represents the most important requests. Mark Ormrod, “Introduction,” in Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance, ed. Mark Ormrod et al. (York, UK: York Medieval Press, 2009), 3–5. Similarly there was informal, often-spoken petitioning at the king’s court and elsewhere.
good *in extremis*\(^{11}\) — rather than how those in authority defined it for them. Also by looking beyond the borders of England to territories under English control from Ireland to lordships held by the English king of the French king in Ponthieu and Aquitaine,\(^{12}\) we can observe how communities on the edges of royal power viewed the English administration’s role toward them and how that same administration responded to them. Overall the following article should help show how communities of various types in the Middle Ages claiming to be in or moving toward extreme necessity saw themselves and/or wanted others to see them, the reality of the situation where known, what petitioners thought would be the best way forward, and the royal government’s reaction to such requests.

I. PETITIONING BY SECULAR COMMUNITIES

Towns and villages are probably the most natural place to start examining expressions of serious communal impoverishment in the Middle Ages, especially as they usually represent the largest single units of population. They also represent those places with potentially the most diverse interests; requests from these communities were therefore seen as in the common good of all by, at the very least, an influential minority. Petitions on behalf of towns and villages make up 167 of 454 communal petitions claiming serious impoverishment from 1250 to 1450 (36.78%). Keeping in mind the approximate dating of some petitions,\(^{13}\) there were in 1250–1299 thirteen petitions (7.78% of secular petitions); in 1300–1349, eighty-one (48.50%); in 1350–1399, fifty (29.94%); and in 1400–1449, twenty-three (13.77%). There was a roughly even proportion of large (for example, London, York), midsize (for example, Dunwich, Ludlow), and small communities (for example, Appleby, West Walton) petitioning. The petitions tended to be instigated by those holding at least burgess status or similar and usually represented town or village government, even though petitions were also sometimes recorded as coming from wider groupings (for example, “the commons,” “the people,”

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11 Petitions were usually composed by clerks or lawyers versed in the formulaic though also often coded language meant to produce a positive outcome — also remembering that petitions were usually meant to be read aloud. Ormrod, “Introduction”; Mark Ormrod, “Murmur, Clamour and Noise: Voicing Complaint and Remedy in Petitions to the English Crown, 1300–1460,” in Ormrod, *Medieval Petitions*, 10–11, 135–137; Helen Killick, “The Scribes of Petitions in Late Medieval England,” in *Petitions and Strategies of Persuasion in the Middle Ages: The English Crown and the Church, c.1200–c.1550*, ed. Thomas Smith and Helen Killick (York, UK: York Medieval Press, 2018), 64–87.

12 Keep in mind that after 1337 the English king periodically laid claim to the French throne itself.

13 Gwilym Dodd, “Parliamentary Petitions?” in Ormrod, *Medieval Petitions*, 15–16.
“the inhabitants”). The reasons given for these petitions fall into three categories — remembering that petitioners sometimes offered more than one reason for their request and in a few cases no rationale at all beyond the need for help: environmental causes; abusive exactions or loss of rights concerning properties, rents, offices, and fees; and war and disorder.

Somewhat surprisingly, extreme weather, fire, and disease — that is, environmental factors — played a minor part in petitions pleading serious secular communal impoverishment: only 18.86% of petitions (31.5/167). This suggests that despite many such problems most towns and villages saw only a limited point to pleas for help to the royal government (see Figure 5), perhaps due to their often-overwhelming nature. Medieval victims of these events in other words felt that they had as little route to aid as those dealing with modern insurance firms.

Nonetheless such matters did sometimes arise in petitions, often from coastal communities struggling with flooding. England’s east coast in particular faced influxes of the sea in this period. In Suffolk the so-called “liege people” of Dunwich suffered from an inundation in the 1350s, which impoverished the town so seriously that it claimed it could not pay its farm (the annual amount by a town in recognition of royal overlordship). Dunwich was struggling throughout this period and much of it would ultimately be lost to the sea — in the late fourteenth century alone approximately 400 buildings were destroyed. Conversely loss of access to open water could also be an issue, especially when it restricted economic activity. Silting up of harbours and drying up of water courses was a particular problem. In the late thirteenth century the “barons” of New Romney (Kent) claimed their town was being ruined because a sea channel had dried up, and they

14 Whether this indicated an increasingly “popular’ element’ to late medieval petitions is open to debate. Gwilym Dodd, Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 271–272.
15 When so fractions are used for calculations. This obviously does not provide exact numbers but rather indications of petition concentrations.
16 A not uncommon occurrence for the east coast in our period. See H.E. Hallam, “The Climate of Eastern England 1250–1350,” Agricultural History Review 32 (1984): 127–128.
17 Special Collections 8 (hereafter SC8)/162/8087, The National Archives, Richmond, UK; Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous 1348–77 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1937), 56.
18 David Sear et al., “Cartographic, Geophysical and Diver Surveys of the Medieval Town Site at Dunwich, Suffolk, England,” International Journal of Nautical Archaeology 40 (2011): 115; Nicholas Comfort, The Lost City of Dunwich (Lavenham, UK: Terence Dalton, 1994), 65–66, 125–136; Judith Middleton-Stewart, “Change and Decay in East Suffolk: The Vicissitudes of Parish Fortunes,” Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology (& History) 41.3 (2007): 331.
were looking for renewed access. The distance from Romney’s centre to the coast remains about a mile and a half, which helps explain its small size compared to other Cinque Ports. Similarly fire caused problems for towns and villages, especially as it spread quickly through buildings made of wood, wattle, and daub. In circa 1435, the “poor inhabitants” of Andover (Hants.) asked for relief from tenths and fifteenths, taxes on moveable goods, for twenty years as their town had been “entirely” destroyed by fire, making them unable to pay amounts due. As a result Andover was granted exemptions in 1435, 1437, 1439, and 1444 to allow for recovery.

Finally some petitions were due to plague outbreaks — though again being on such an overwhelming scale, most communities probably felt it patently unprofitable to petition their government. Nonetheless in the 1370s the “mayor, bailiffs and commons” of the town of Newcastle asked for royal help to secure their defences — particularly important due to Scottish attacks on the North and their renewed alliance with the French with the Treaty of Vincennes (1371) — as they claimed a third of their town had been destroyed by plague. This reflected the wider situation in the North as the plague would show up in the region five times before 1400 and reduce Newcastle’s population from 7,000–8,000 before the Black Death of 1348–1349 to 3,500–4,000 by 1377.

However, going by surviving petitions, serious impoverishment connected with claims of excessive exactions by the royal government and/or other overlords or loss of rights to the same or other claimants were of somewhat greater importance for towns and villages, accounting for 29.34% (49 of 167) of petitions. Often such petitions were sent to the king and his advisers when no help was available through the court system, in particular the Common Pleas or King’s Bench (through land claims, trespass, and debt, for example). Some requests involved financial encroachments by local lords or royal officers to the point where those affected felt they had to petition the

19 SC8/70/3462. For Romney’s problems, see Stephen Rippon, “Romney Marsh: Evolution of the Historic Landscape and Its Wider Setting,” in Romney Marsh: Coastal and Landscape Change throughout the Ages, ed. Antony Long et al. (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2002), 91–95.
20 SC8/90/4477. They are referred to as “poor” inhabitants, but this is the language of entreaty rather than an indication of poverty. For similar usage see SC8/309/15408; SC8/10/489 SC8/4/194; SC8/219/10902.
21 VCH Hampshire (London, 1911), 4:348; C. Collier, “Andover and Its Neighbourhood,” Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine 21.63 (1884): 308.
22 SC8/130/6453; Anthony Pollard and Diana Newton, “Introduction,” in Newcastle and Gateshead before 1700, ed. Diana Newton and Anthony Pollard (Chichester, UK: Phillimore, 2009), xix–xx, xxv–xxvii.
23 Alistair Moffat and George Rosie, Tyneside: A History of Newcastle and Gateshead from Earliest Times (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2005), 151–152.
king’s government. This was undoubtedly due to an increasingly intrusive royal and lordly administration fuelled by the continued expansion of record-keeping\textsuperscript{24} but also possibly by the destabilization of land tenure resulting from repeated plague outbreaks.\textsuperscript{25} In circa 1437 the mayor and citizens of the city of Lincoln petitioned the parliamentary commons to ask the king for freedom from customs charges for shipping wool from Hull or Boston, as well as from fifteenth and tenths, so that they could pay the city’s farm (indicating full tenure but with payment of a fixed rent).\textsuperscript{26} If that was not allowed they requested the king take back Lincoln’s liberties so the farm could be cancelled. These requests were made because various taxes, mainly for the French war, and the farm had impoverished Lincoln, causing its abandonment to its “utter and final destruction.”\textsuperscript{27} Though the truth of such claims by Lincoln have been questioned by Bridbury, who sees them as part of a wider tradition of later medieval towns overstating burdens to gain aid from the king’s government,\textsuperscript{28} as we will see Lincoln was under considerable financial pressure by the early fifteenth century, which might help explain the petition.\textsuperscript{29}

Of longer-term consequence, though, were serious problems with commercial and judicial rights (for example, to hold markets, county courts), which could have a more sustained impact on towns and villages, especially painful after the thirteenth-century economic expansion but also the decreased vitality of some urban communities due to the Black Death’s prolonged impact.\textsuperscript{30} In 1320 “the men” of Dunwich, mentioned above, petitioned the king concerning new local markets and fairs that had devalued the town’s economic worth — though perhaps also in response

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Michael Clanchy, \textit{From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 54–79.
\item \textsuperscript{25} See for example John Munro, “The Late Medieval Decline of English Demesne Agriculture: Demographic, Monetary, and Political-Fiscal Factors,” in \textit{Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death}, ed. Mark Bailey and Stephen Rigby (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012), 290–348; Jan Titow, “Lost Rents, Vacant Holdings and the Contraction of Peasant Cultivation after the Black Death,” \textit{Agricultural History Review} 42.2 (1994): 97–114.
\item \textsuperscript{26} SC8/122/6083; for other claims, see Francis Hill, \textit{Medieval Lincoln} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 270–273.
\item \textsuperscript{27} SC8/122/6083.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Anthony Bridbury, “English Provincial Towns in the Later Middle Ages,” \textit{Economic History Review}, 2nd ser., 34.1 (1981): 8–10.
\item \textsuperscript{29} See also Alan Kissane, \textit{Civic Community in Late Medieval Lincoln: Urban Society and Economy in the Age of the Black Death, 1289–1409} (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2017), 117–119.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Richard Britnell, “The Black Death in English Towns,” \textit{Urban History} 21 (1994): 195–210; for a more optimistic view of late medieval towns see Keith Lilley, “Urban Planning after the Black Death: Townscape Transformation in Later Medieval England (1350–1530),” \textit{Urban History} 42.1 (2015): 22–42.
\end{itemize}
to recent storms and flooding. Like Lincoln, Bailey refers to thirteenth-century claims by Dunwich as “disingenuous” because they “smack of greed and special pleading,” but such claims continued throughout the fourteenth century, indicating there was perhaps more to them.

Indeed 1327 subsidy documentation shows Dunwich contributing “the least of any Suffolk borough,” and by 1328 the port was “out of action.”

Judicial rights, usually hard won, were especially important as associated profits (such as fines paid, accommodation while at court) were lucrative to towns. Yet such rights were often in flux in the later Middle Ages, again perhaps due to the plague’s wider impact on towns and villages. In 1366 the burgesses of Ilchester in Somerset, a county presumably heavily hit by the Black Death (Melcombe Regis in neighbouring Dorset is usually considered to be the plague’s entry point into Britain in 1348), petitioned the king in Parliament concerning the earlier loss of the right to hold the county court to their considerable impoverishment, claiming they could no longer pay their town’s farm. The court’s return (including gaol rights) to the town, probably a result of this petition, was an attempt to aid the local economy.

It was the impact of warfare and disorder that accounted for 50.60% of petitions pleading serious hardship from towns and villages (84.5 of 167) however, emphasizing not only the widespread disruption for medieval communities under the English king’s lordship but also a sense that the royal government had some responsibility to help. Indeed while such communities were often somewhat hesitant to petition about natural disasters or, though to a lesser degree, abusive exactions or loss of rights, they did feel entitled to petition, often in effect to complain, about the impact of the king’s wars — as well as the implications of the monarch failing in his duty to preserve law and order.

Some petitions came as a direct result of the Welsh, Scottish, or French wars, whether in terms of raiding or prolonged campaigns. Such warfare could severely affect a town’s living and commerce districts, as well as its longer-term ability to finance defences. Around 1318 the burgesses of the border town of Bamburgh (Northumberland) asked for relief from their twenty-six mark farm until the area recovered from repeated and devastating Scottish raids, which had followed the catastrophic English defeat at Bannockburn in 1314 — there were many such petitions concerning

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31 SC8/82/4092; SC8/8/380.
32 See SC8/277/13812; SC8/21/1010; Mark Bailey, Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200–1500 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007), 125. More generally see Sear, “Cartographic, Geophysical and Diver Surveys,” 114–116.
33 Comfort, Lost City of Dunwich, 129; Middleton-Stewart, “Change and Decay,” 331.
34 SC8/119/5905; see also SC8/118/5895; SC8/2/77.
35 VCH Somerset (London, 1974), 3:185.
36 SC8/34/1652.
Bamburgh and area in this period.\textsuperscript{37} Later in 1378 the mayor and commonality of the town of Melcombe Regis (Dorset) petitioned the king to be free of various exactions for several decades because of a recent French attack, the result of the renewal of the Hundred Years’ War, by which the town claimed to be depopulated and destroyed.\textsuperscript{38} Though this was probably an exaggeration given the town’s continued existence, if not vibrancy, in the later Middle Ages,\textsuperscript{39} there is little doubt Melcombe struggled throughout this period, with its farm cancelled in 1388 for seven years and reduced afterward.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed Melcombe clearly saw its needs in a similar league to those of Southampton,\textsuperscript{41} another south coast town prone to French raiding.

Material demands for the king’s forces, an unavoidable encumbrance for late medieval communities (especially with the growing size and complexity of medieval armies), brought forth some of the more vehement claims of need, with shipbuilding being an especially heavy imposition for coastal towns.\textsuperscript{42} In 1372 the “simple burgesses” of Hull petitioned king and council for discharge from warship building for the French war due to the community’s poverty, as well as the “very great charges” connected with their ships elsewhere in the royal service.\textsuperscript{43} Around 1377 the complaints of Hull’s burgesses were expanded to include ship seizure and defence costs against the Scots, causing some inhabitants to leave the town; the situation was so dire that around the same time a demand for a barge from Hull for the king’s wars was paid for privately by two of its leading citizens.\textsuperscript{44}

Similarly there were law and order concerns within the king’s dominions, during wartime or otherwise, which caused communities to petition for aid, usually the lessening or postponement of taxation and other

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} SC8/95/4725; SC8/32/1565; SC8/165/8209; SC8/112/5581; see also Charles Coulson, Castles in Medieval Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257–258.
\item \textsuperscript{38} SC8/185/9214.
\item \textsuperscript{39} “Weymouth,” The History of Parliament, <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421/constituencies/weymouth>, accessed 26 October 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Mark Forrest, “The Development of Dorset’s Harbours in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society 138 (2017): 21–22.
\item \textsuperscript{41} SC8/185/9214.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Though it also has potential economic benefits. Maryanne Kowaleski, “Port Towns: England and Wales 1300–1540,” in The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. 1, 600–1540 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 475–476.
\item \textsuperscript{43} SC8/119/5902.
\item \textsuperscript{44} SC8/120/5952; Calendar of Patent Rolls 1374–7 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1916), 428; VCH East Yorkshire (London, 1969), 1:23; Jennifer Kermode, “Merchants, Overseas Trade, and Urban Decline: York, Beverley and Hull, c.1380–1500,” Northern History 23 (1987): 51–73.
\end{itemize}
exactions. In particular the shift from a law state to a war state in the later Middle Ages and the growing activity of the king’s armies increased the chance of instability within the king’s dominion, as we will see, something clearly evident in border areas. As with excessive exaction and loss of rights, such petitions arose when no help was apparently available through normal channels (for example, Common Pleas, King’s Bench). If nothing else this was because the monarch was the ultimate source of justice within the English king’s dominions — though also again probably due to the determination of towns and villages to protect their economic position and hard-won legal rights. Such petitions were especially prevalent during civil disturbances. During the 1321–1322 rebellion against Edward II, the “poor people of the vills” of Albury, Farnham, Braughing, and Patmore (Herts.) petitioned king and council against Sir John Patemore for kidnapping, ransoming, and theft, an act that — unlike similar suits in the King’s Bench — was more likely to bring the situation to the notice of the king himself or at the very least his council. It is worth noting that Farnham in the 1320s saw a steep decline in land transfers, a sign of the seriousness of the problems. Ultimately in this case the villagers were told to return to the law courts to find redress.

Such law and order issues with the local nobility and gentry were common in this period; nonetheless these issues also showed tensions between the landed elite and the developing urban classes, especially concerning property rights but also, more generally, local politics. In 1411 the mayor, citizens, and commonalty of Lincoln petitioned the king for a commission concerning the activities of Walter Tailboys and Geoffrey Luttrell, including assault and murder, to the point where its citizens could not go to Boston or Hull to sell wool. This was part of a long-running series of disputes between town and local gentry over rights, including the election of the mayor and bailiffs — which at one point saw 160 armed men heading

45 Richard Kaeuper, War, Justice and Public Order: England and France in the Late Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
46 SC8/4/194; see also Christopher Dyer, “The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381,” in The English Rising of 1381, ed. Rodney Hilton and Trevor Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31.
47 Mark Page, “The Peasant Land Market on the Bishop of Winchester’s Manor of Farnham, 1263–1349,” Surrey Archaeological Collections 90 (2003): 166–168.
48 For a succinct overview of noble/gentry relations in our period see Christine Carpenter, “The Nobility and the Gentry,” in A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages, ed. Stephen Rigby (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 261–282.
49 SC8/124/6178; Calendar of Patent Rolls 1408–13 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1909), 316–317; “TAILBOYS, Sir Walter (1350–1417), of Sotby and Skellingthorpe, Lincs.,” The History of Parliament, <http://www.historyofparliamentsonline.org/volume/1386-1421/member/tailboys-sir-walter-1350-1417>, accessed 26 October 2020.
toward the town.\textsuperscript{50} The dispute both impoverished the city and harmed royal farm and customs revenues.\textsuperscript{51}

Even those on the edges of English rule, traditionally areas of disorder, nonetheless petitioned the king’s government for aid. Early in Edward I’s reign (1272–1307), English and Irish tenants of Saggart, a royal manor on the edge of the Dublin Pale, claimed impoverishment and inability to pay rent due to criminal activity that in turn was depopulating the area.\textsuperscript{52} Such raiding was a problem for most of the fourteenth century, also connected with Edward Bruce’s 1315–1317 invasion, and may be why Saggart’s farm was reassessed in 1331–1332.\textsuperscript{53} Welsh communities face similar problems, as when in circa 1296 the burgesses of Flint petitioned for respite from the royal farm due to damage during Edward I’s Welsh wars,\textsuperscript{54} a request presumably also connected with the outlays for the recent building of Flint castle.\textsuperscript{55}

Overall though, both instability and military activity causing serious impoverishment within England, on its borders and beyond, were key issues for complaint by towns and villages in our period. While it was the king’s duty to protect against threats to local law and order, and the declaration of open warfare was usually the monarch’s decision as defender of the kingdom’s rights, petitions concerning both were in essence offering — if \textit{sotto voce} — criticisms of the monarch’s rule or at the very least clear comment on the impact of royal policy in specific localities.

\textbf{II. PETITIONING BY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES}

Petitions of serious hardship and impoverishment from towns and villages made up a substantial portion of surviving extreme need petitions, with roughly half connected with war and disorder. Overall that need was

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Hill, \textit{Medieval Lincoln}, 259, 274.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} See footnote 49.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} SC8/197/9811; see also SC8/118/5882. For background see Áine Foley, \textit{The Royal Manors of Medieval Co. Dublin} (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts, 2013), 172–176.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Margaret Murphy, “‘The Key of the County’: Saggart and the Manorial Economy of the Dublin March c. 1200–1540,” in \textit{The March in the Islands of the Medieval West}, ed. Jenifer Ni Ghrádaigh and Emmett O’Byrne (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 63–69; John Bradley, “The Medieval Boroughs of County Dublin,” in \textit{Dublin and beyond the Pale}, ed. Conleth Manning (Bray, Ireland: Wordwell, 1998), 136–137.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} SC8/112/5554. Notably Scottish communities tended to petition in common; see the third section, “Petitioning by Groupings of Communities.”
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Including almost 2,000 men raised from the area to build the castle. Rick Turner, “The Life and Career of Richard the Engineer,” in \textit{The Impact of the Edwardian Castles in Wales}, ed. Diane Williams and John Kenyon (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 46.
\end{itemize}
expressed in a succinct manner, with petitioning communities suggesting their preferred form of help — which normally, unsurprisingly given the relatively limited resources of the medieval state, involved relief from exactions rather than direct aid. However a somewhat larger number of impoverishment petitions — 48.24% (219) — were from religious communities, primarily abbeys, monasteries, priories, and hospitals: in 1250–1299, 12 (5.48% of religious petitions); in 1300–1349, 148 (67.60%); in 1350–1399, 41 (18.72%); and in 1400–1449, 18 (8.22%). Though these 219 petitions represent a far smaller percentage of the population than those from secular communities, they embody a larger proportion of the inhabitants of all religious houses and show even more clearly where the stress points lay for the later medieval Church — as well as the increasing power of the Crown over the Church. The requests usually came from the abbot/ess, prior/ess, or similar, along with the brothers or sisters and/or the house as a whole — though again toned by lawyers or clerks. The vast majority of petitions from individual institutions were from male houses (200/219 — 91.32%). Female religious houses were somewhat less likely to petition, probably symptomatic of their generally less predominant and powerful position in the Church hierarchy and society: while female houses made up 28.89% (260/900) of houses by the end of our period, they were only responsible for 8.68% (19/219) of petitions. Overall the groupings of religious petition are similar but not identical to those from towns and villages: environmental causes, loss of rights and abusive exactions, general/endemic/long-term poverty, and war and disorder.

As with towns and villages, least common were impoverishment petitions from religious houses based on environmental problems (9.82%; 21.5/219). This is somewhat unexpected given that a number of religious orders, especially the Cistercians, focused their activities on the geographical margins and were therefore more prone to local environmental problems. However as with secular communities, the effectiveness of petitioning the king’s administration concerning overwhelming natural events probably came into play. Nonetheless sometimes desperation (such as when a house’s survival was in question) pushed religious communities beyond both the Church (for example petitioning bishops and on occasion the pope for some form of relief) and the legal system to petition the highest levels

56 Though there was one such petition from a parish concerning French raiding; see SC8/213/10644.
57 See Bruce Campbell, “Benchmarking Medieval Economic Development: England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, c.1290,” Economic History Review 61.4 (2008): 896–945, esp. Tables 1, 4.
58 George Bernard, The Late Medieval English Church: Vitality and Vulnerability before the Break with Rome (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), ch. 2.
59 See footnote 11; Dodd, Justice and Grace, 247–248.
60 For the total numbers of houses see Bernard, Late Medieval English Church, 165.
of the king’s government. Cattle diseases were often an issue especially as they affected important revenues of Church estates. At some point between 1316 and 1328 the abbot and convent of the struggling Abbey of Pipewell (Northants) petitioned for help with royal taxation arising from serious, possibly terminal, impoverishment due to a livestock murra in, probably the 1322 outbreak, resulting in leasing of lands to survive. In this case the abbey was briefly abandoned in 1323 due to poverty.

Often many issues combined to push a house to the limits of its resources. Around 1317 in the aftermath of the Great Famine, the abbot and convent of Tupholme (Lincs.) claimed the inability to pay a corrodian (a pensioner supported by the abbey) appointed by Edward II due to the expense of a chaplain’s salary to pray for Piers Gaveston’s soul, severe impoverishment through flooding, murrains, and the resulting purchase instead of production of food. By mid century Tupholme had moved beyond the English religious and secular hierarchies and petitioned the pope himself for aid — unsurprising as the monastery had been reduced to ‘“forgery and counterfeiting coin of the realm,” using the proceeds to buy corn and wine which [was] sold at a profit.” Similarly a few religious houses requested aid due to the impact of the Black Death on their ability to survive. In 1352 the abbot of Croxton (Leics.) petitioned the king’s council that, due to his abbey’s state as a result of the plague, he be exempt from holding the office of collector of clerical taxation in Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, and Bedfordshire. Croxton, as Tupholme, had had a number of problems throughout the fourteenth century (for example its church burned down in 1326; Scottish raiding on its northern possessions), including most of the house’s senior canons dying of the plague. It was then unsurprising if

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61 For venues for complaint see Marjorie McIntosh, “Negligence, Greed and the Operation of English Charities, 1350–1603,” Continuity and Change 27.1 (2012): 55–58.
62 SC8/66/3274.
63 VCH Northamptonshire (London, 1906), 2:118–119; Adrian Bell et al., “‘Leger est apriendre mes fort est arendre’: Wool, Debt, and the Dispersal of Pipewell Abbey (1280–1330),” Journal of Medieval History 32.3 (2006): 187–211.
64 SC8/197/9804; Gwilym Dodd and Alison McHardy, eds., Petitions to the Crown from English Religious Houses, c.1272–c.1485 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2010), 94–95.
65 Petitions to the Pope 1342–1419 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1896), 107–108; Norman Bainbridge, “The ‘White Canons’ Rediscovered,” History Today 40.4 (1990): 2; VCH Lincolnshire (London, 1906), 2:206.
66 SC8/209/10410; Dodd and McHardy, Religious Houses, 97.
67 Albert Herbert, “Croxton Abbey,” Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society 22.4 (1944–1945): 290–191; VCH Leicestershire (London, 1969), 2:29–30.
68 Calendar of Close Rolls 1349–54 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1906), 335–336.
tax collection was not high on the abbot’s list of priorities. Overall though, environmental petitions were the exception — religious houses, as towns and villages, seemed to know when circumstances were beyond the help of even the king’s government.

Petitions to the king’s government claiming serious poverty by abbeys, monasteries, priories, and hospitals due to excessive exactions or loss, removal, or abuse of rights (46.5/219; 21.23%) were of greater importance, in particular emphasizing the weakened economic state of many smaller late medieval houses,69 as well as the concentration of such requests after 1300 in line with an early fourteenth-century economic crisis. Excessive exactions by various authorities were a key problem, impacting not just the present financial position of houses but also their ability to sustain themselves in future. In 1300–1325, the “poor brethren” of struggling St Bartholomew’s Hospital, London, petitioned king and council claiming serious poverty — which along with a small rental income was further exacerbated by the urban government trying to exact even more money, making it difficult for the hospital to give alms and sustain its inmates.70 The royal government could likewise force detrimental exactions beyond even taxation for war. In circa 1302 the Master and Brethren of the Hospital of St Katherine by the Tower in London petitioned the king to pay in instalments for various exactions for lands in Cornhill originally granted the hospital by the king’s mother, claiming destruction otherwise.71 By circa 1327 the hospital was in a “ruinous condition.”72

Other requests concerned the loss of rights, again often datable to the early fourteenth century — though unlike in secular communities, rights over lands and alms rather than markets and courts tended to be at issue. In this we may possibly in part see the impact of increased population pressure on land in the decades before the Black Death.73 For instance in 1317 the abbot and convent of Caerleon Abbey in Wales petitioned king and council for the return of lands because while previously a house with healthy finances

69 See section V, “Conclusion.”
70 SC8/68/3364; see also VCH London (London, 1909), 1:520–522; James Kemble, “The Medieval Estates of St Bartholomew’s Hospital, London,” Essex Journal 50 (2015): 5–8.
71 SC8/314/E140; Calendar of Close Rolls 1296–1302 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1906), 252–253; VCH London, 1:525–526.
72 Helen Cam, “The Religious Houses of London and the Eyre of 1321,” in Medieval Studies Presented to Aubrey Gwynn, ed. John Watt et al. (Dublin: Colm O’Lochlainn, 1961), 325.
73 Debate continues however concerning population and land availability. Richard Smith, “Demographic Developments in Rural England, 1300–1348: A Survey,” in Before the Black Death: Studies in the “Crisis” of the Early Fourteenth Century, ed. Bruce Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 25–78.
and some sixty monks, as a result of the earl of Gloucester not fulfilling his end of a land exchange, only twenty impoverished monks remained.\footnote{74} This was doubtless also due to Gloucester’s death at Bannockburn and the subsequent partition of his estate.\footnote{75} Such cases came from all corners of the king’s dominions. In Northern France in 1320–1337 the abbot and convent of Forest-Montiers claimed “great impoverishment” and potential “ruin” because they were prevented by local inhabitants from receiving alms traditionally given by the counts of Ponthieu. This was probably due to growing tensions between England and France with the implied threat that if they were not helped by English authorities, they might look to the French king.\footnote{76} Such rights were difficult for religious houses to regain once lost — hence the need to push for their return at the highest levels of the royal government.

Slightly more common, though obviously connected with excessive exactions or loss of rights,\footnote{77} were more general claims of existing substantial need from religious houses, often unconnected with any specific event but reinforcing the idea that a number of smaller institutions, of which we have seen many, were struggling financially.\footnote{78} This marks such institutions off from towns and villages, perhaps because secular communities were less willing to admit to long-term decline due to communal pride or commercial reputation. Nonetheless these requests made up some 22.6% of petitions from religious houses (49.5/219) and as with other religious petitions are often datable to the early fourteenth century (see Figure 6).

Some petitions just indicated poverty being a reality of a house and gave little further information. Around 1325 the master and brethren of the Hospital of St John, Bridgwater (Somerset), pleaded to the king that they could not sustain William de la Sale’s pension, as they were so impoverished as to be unable to keep themselves.\footnote{79} This may have partly been unwillingness to pay for an outsider, especially as the hospital was struggling throughout the period — the reported lack of hospitality to “wayfarers” arriving at the hospital’s door may also indicate this.\footnote{80} St John’s was later known for producing spurious foundation statutes emphasizing the hospital’s local rights — another sign of deeper problems.\footnote{81}

\footnote{74} SC8/168/8368.
\footnote{75} Frances Underhill, For Her Good Estate: The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999), 12ff.
\footnote{76} SC8/289/14401.
\footnote{77} Hence the combining of these groups in Figure 6.
\footnote{78} Bernard, Late Medieval English Church, 181.
\footnote{79} SC8/93/4602.
\footnote{80} VCH Somerset (London, 1911), 2:155.
\footnote{81} Sethina Watson, “The Origins of the English Hospital,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th ser., 16 (2006): 82.
Often some sense of having fallen rather than simply being in poverty was present, as when the master and brothers of St Michael’s Hospital, Warwick, petitioned to receive gifts of lands and rents as the hospital had fallen into “great poverty” by 1324, a situation not helped by small original endowments.82 Indeed direct blame of past generations frequently appeared in such petitions,83 probably to divert criticism from the incumbents but also indicating longer-term financial issues for many later medieval houses. In 1332 the abbot of West Dereham (Norfolk) petitioned the king that his house be allowed to pay only sixteen shillings for the aid (forced gift) for the king’s sister’s marriage, as the abbey had been damaged by previous abbcacies, until the house was struggling to survive.84 These were in other words fairly standard pleas from distressed institutions, often with no clear connection with any event but rather reflecting the general economic problems of smaller religious houses in the period.

As with secular communities though, serious claims concerning war and disorder were the main reason for petitioning the king’s government by religious houses (93.5/219; 42.7%). The loss of crops, valuables, and rights in wartime could seriously damage houses’ viability in the short and long terms. That said, unlike secular communities only a few claims focused on local disorder — perhaps evidence that later medieval economic problems made the limited wealth of some houses less interesting to grasping local inhabitants. In circa 1285 the prioress of Broomhall (Berks.) petitioned concerning one hundred acres of waste in Ashridge that Henry de Lacy, earl of Lincoln, and Margaret, his wife, had given the priory but that had been raided by local armed bands causing considerable harm to the priory’s fortunes.85 It was obvious that the priory was struggling by Edward II’s reign (1307–1327)86 — though it did survive until the Dissolution.87

Nonetheless compared with secular petitions, more petitions focused on the impact of open warfare, especially involving houses in destabilized regions. Some petitions were directly linked to Welsh and French conflicts and their impact on ecclesiastical estates. Around 1294 the abbot of Conway petitioned to be pardoned thirty pounds of clerical taxation due to substantial

82 SC8/150/7473; see also VCH Warwickshire (London, 1908), 2:116.
83 For maladministration see McIntosh, “Negligence, Greed,” 66–71.
84 SC8/106/5284. This is perhaps an overstatement as Dereham was fairly wealthy in the late Middle Ages. For background see VCH Norfolk (London, 1970), 2:414–418; Benjamin Thompson, “Monasteries and Their Patrons at Foundation and Dissolution,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th ser., 4 (1994): 124.
85 Calendar of Patent Rolls 1281–92 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1893), 185; SC8/326/E733.
86 VCH Berkshire (London, 1907), 2:80.
87 Bernard, Late Medieval English Church, 193.
damage resulting from the Welsh war, problems not helped by Edward I’s forced relocation of the abbey in order to build Conway Castle. In 1322 the prior and convent of Brecon in South Wales petitioned king and council for the confirmation of various lands, having suffered serious privation, especially during the disturbances of the early 1320s. Notably, considerable destruction took place in this period, including that of much documentation for local houses — hence the need for a confirmation.

The French wars were also brought home to English religious houses in a pointed manner. Early in the Hundred Years’ War, circa 1339, the prior and convent of St Denis (Hampshire) claimed that French burning and destruction of their Southampton properties, as well as financial and manpower needs for the town’s defence, made them unable to sustain themselves. A Southampton raid in late 1338 saw the town’s sacking and the killing of many of its defenders. Overall it is interesting how little the protective medieval idea of individual sanctuary was thought to have a wider application toward religious houses themselves and their interests.

However, going from surviving petitions, Scottish and Irish wars, again mainly in the early fourteenth century, caused the most problems for religious houses within English dominions. In 1305 the abbot and convent of Sweetheart Abbey in Scotland petitioned that the king and council be informed of their considerable problems, including a 5,000-mark debt. This was an amount accumulated over decades, doubtless increased by

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88 SC8/186/9298; Henry Ellis, “Register and Chronicle of the Abbey of Aberconway,” in *Camden Miscellany*, vol. 1, ed. Camden Society, Camden Old Series 39 (London: Camden Society, 1847), 12–13.
89 SC8/6/298; CCharR1300–26, 444; James Davies, “The Despenser War in Glamorgan,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 3rd ser., 9 (1915): 58.
90 Robert Weeks, “Transport and Trade in South Wales c. 1100–1400” (PhD diss., University of Wales, 2003), 19.
91 SC8/142/7079; Dodd and McHardy, *English Religious Houses*, 94–95; John Stracey et al., eds., *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (London, 1787), ii, 111, 114; Ernest Blake, *The Cartulary of the Priory of St Denys Near Southampton*, 2 vols. (Southampton, UK: Southampton Record Series, 1981), 1:xl–xli; *VCH Hampshire* (London, 1903), 2:162.
92 Colin Platt, *Medieval Southampton* (London: Routledge, 1973), 107–118.
93 Richard Oram, “Dividing the Spoils: War, Schism and Religious Patronage on the Anglo-Scottish Border, c.1332–c.1400,” in *England and Scotland in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Andy King and Matthew Penman (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007), 136–156; Brendan Smith, *Crisis and Survival in Late Medieval Ireland: The English of Louth and their Neighbours*, 1330–1450 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 5.
94 SC8/108/5382.
95 Sweetheart’s poverty was well known. “Sweetheart Abbey,” Historic Environment Scotland, <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/sweetheart-abbey/history/>, accessed 26 October 2020.
the First War of Scottish Independence, when Galloway was at the centre of events. Further in 1306 Welsh soldiers were billeted at the abbey, for which the abbot claimed a further 400 pounds in damages.\textsuperscript{96} These in other words were not just requests concerning rights and comforts for an institutions’ inhabitants but entreaties for the communities’ continued existence. Houses in border areas were particularly at risk. In 1305 the master and brethren of St Nicholas’s Hospital outside Carlisle petitioned the king for financial leniency because their house had been destroyed by the Scots and would be unable to recover without royal help.\textsuperscript{97} If nothing else the pressure on Carlisle to raise and provision troops was prohibitive.\textsuperscript{98} Further east on England’s northern border in circa 1320 the prioress and convent of Holystone in Redesdale (Northumberland) petitioned the king for relief from the issues of Newcastle due to raiding, claiming they would abandon the house otherwise\textsuperscript{99} — which they ultimately had to do, if temporarily.\textsuperscript{100} This claim was clearly believed by Edward II as, somewhat unusually for such a petition, his intention to help the house appears on the endorsement.

A similar tone is found in petitions from Irish houses, especially near areas of English colonization, and again in the early fourteenth century, a period of considerable instability heightened by the Bruce invasion of Ireland in 1315–1317.\textsuperscript{101} In 1302 the abbot of Baltinglass, near the edge of the English Pale, petitioned king and council to pay a royal debt in instalments as the abbey had been impoverished by various expenses and Irish raiding.\textsuperscript{102} And in circa 1323–1324 the prior of the Hospital of St John outside Dublin informed the king and council that his church, granges, and other properties had been burned by the Scots and native Irish, and along with

\textsuperscript{96} James Richardson, \textit{Sweetheart Abbey: The Stewartry of Kirkcudbright} (Edinburgh: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1951), 6.

\textsuperscript{97} SC8/100/4959; SC8/100/4954. See also W. Wiseman, “The Hospital of St. Nicholas, Carlisle and Its Masters: Part 1,” \textit{Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society} 95 (1995): 98–100; \textit{VCH Cumberland} (London, 1905), 2:199–200.

\textsuperscript{98} Mike McCarthy, \textit{Carlisle: A Frontier and Border City} (London: Routledge, 2018), 185–186.

\textsuperscript{99} SC8/83/4107; \textit{Calendar of Patent Rolls 1317–21} (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1903), 519.

\textsuperscript{100} Matthew Holford and Keith Stringer, \textit{Border Liberties and Loyalties: North East England} c.1200–1400 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 396–397.

\textsuperscript{101} See Colm McNamee, “The Bruce Invasions of Ireland,” \textit{History Ireland} 1.1 (1993): 11–16.

\textsuperscript{102} SC8/31/1534; \textit{Calendar of Close Rolls} 1296–1302, 547. This includes wool sales affected by the 1281–1282 and 1296–1297 winters. Geraldine Carville, \textit{Baltinglass: Abbey of the Three Rivers} (Moone, Ireland: West Wicklow Historical Society, 1984), 51, 61.
the weight of incumbent charges for the poor and sick (about 155), without aid the hospital would be unable to function.103 Indeed evidence exists of much destruction in the Pale around this time,104 and by 1334 St John’s had to be granted funds for seven years because “their goods and possessions in the suburbs of Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland are greatly wasted by the hostile attacks of Scots and Irish.”105 The destabilization of the Pale in the first decades of the fourteenth century, as with those houses on the Anglo-Scottish border throughout our period and the problems in Wales and France, clearly continued to impact the viability of local religious institutions for years to come.106

III. PETITIONING BY GROUPINGS OF COMMUNITIES

When the overall numbers are examined then, though religious petitions are more numerous (by 23.74%), the proportions of the causes of petitions by religious houses against petitioning by towns and villages was surprisingly similar, especially given their differing circumstances (see figures). When we look at petitions from groups of such communities, whether secular or religious, there were 68 out of 454 (14.98%) concerning serious communal deprivation on behalf of county/regional “commons” and/or collections of religious communities.107 As Ormrod notes however the distinction concerning common petitions “was a fluctuating and sometimes contested one, since a number of different influences were at work in deciding what made a petition ‘common,’” including those raising “specific issues that had wider implications for the realm and its government,” those from the parliamentary commons, and those from collections of communities either

103 SC8/15/736; SC8/181/906.
104 Grace O’Keeffe, “The Hospital of St John the Baptist in Medieval Dublin: Functions and Maintenance,” in Medieval Dublin IX, ed. Sean Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 178–179; Charles McNeill, “Hospital of St John without the Newgate, Dublin,” in Medieval Dublin: The Living City, ed. Howard Clarke (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990), 81.
105 Calendar of Patent Rolls 1330–4 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1893), 552; see also Mark Hennessy, “The Priory and Hospital of New Gate: The Evolution and Decline of a Medieval Monastic Estate,” in Common Ground: Essays on the Historical Geography of Ireland, ed. Kevin Whelan and William Smyth (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1988), 49–50.
106 Including English soldiers pillaging both sides of the Scottish border. Philip Slavin, “Warfare and Ecological Destruction in Early Fourteenth-Century British Isles,” Environmental History 19.3 (2014): 531.
107 Except the “commons of the realm” and similar phrases, namely, without clear geographical focus — which are difficult to connect to specific impoverishment. See for example SC8/80/3956; SC8/193/9131.
“formally constituted” or “pragmatically imagined.” The latter is focused on here as representing wider collectives of communities looked at in the first two sections.

Indeed the petitions analyzed in this section go beyond the normal groupings of medieval secular or religious society and instead bring together a number of such groups. These usually involved some form of agreement for action from burgesses, churchmen, and others in authority within a certain geographical area — though usually referred to as the people, the commons, or similar. Such petitions numbered four in 1250–1299 (5.88%); thirty-six in 1300–1349 (52.94%); twenty-one in 1350–1399 (30.88%); and seven in 1400–1449 (10.29%) — again peaking in the first half of the fourteenth century, with all twelve wider ecclesiastical petitions dated between 1285 and 1330.

Less than a third (21.5/68; 31.62%) of wider petitions emphasized more general regional concerns. Administrative abuses by important officials were a particular focus, especially abuses of their financial or proprietorial rights. Probably datable to the later fourteenth century, Robert Littestere, citizen of Durham, petitioned king and council concerning transgressions against the people of the diocese of Durham by Simon de Newton, an episcopal official. This included taking remuneration for the proving of wills, to “the considerable extortion and impoverishment of the people and great mischief and destruction,” and part of wider tensions between the local population and the ecclesiastical authorities. Likewise a sharp reaction from collectives of religious houses could occur as when, in the mid fourteenth century, the “clergy of England” petitioned against the abbot of Cluny concerning the severe impact of taxation on the abbey’s English properties. Again this was doubtless partly due to the French war, though again it was also due to the changing relationship between the English Church, the international Church, and the English monarchy — in this case emphasizing the latter’s power as ultimate judge. As previously however, only a few such petitions concerned environmental issues. In 1376 the commons of Essex and Hertfordshire petitioned the king for a perpetual lessening of their county farms because of the extreme distress caused by

108 Ormrod, “Murmur, Clamour and Noise,” 136–137. See generally Mark Ormrod et al., eds., Early Common Petitions in the English Parliament, c. 1290–c.1420 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
109 SC8/58/2893.
110 Peter Larson, Conflict and Compromise in the Late Medieval Countryside: Lords and Peasants in Durham, 1349–1400 (London: Routledge, 2006), 192–195; Christian Liddy, The Bishopric of Durham in the Late Middle Ages: Lordship, Community and the Cult of St Cuthbert (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2008), ch. 3.
111 SC8/79/3932.
112 Bernard, Late Medieval English Church, ch. 2.
another plague outbreak.\textsuperscript{113} Notably, aside from wanting financial relief, probably also the result of the renewal of the Hundred Years’ War, many such petitions came at the same time as the growing importance of commons backed petitions in Parliament and often overlapped with them.\textsuperscript{114}

Most wider communal impoverishment petitions (46.5/68; 68.38%) were again directly connected with warfare, disorder, and associated exactions, especially those impacting economic health and legal rights. Coastal areas were obvious targets for attack. In circa 1305–1309 “the people” of the Channel Isles petitioned the king for relief due to the depredations of the French, as well as harassment by the Bishop of Coutance’s court.\textsuperscript{115} The enemy action included a 1294 attack, which by one account left 1,500 dead.\textsuperscript{116} Sometime earlier “the people” of the Islands petitioned for the appointment of a new guardian as they had faced severe hardship under previous guardians, losing customs’ rights and being attacked in wartime.\textsuperscript{117} However civil strife also caused communities to unite in complaint, especially as internecine warfare doubled the impact of disturbances. In 1322 after the Contrariants’ rising against Edward II, the “commonality” of Lincolnshire petitioned king and council for aid due to cattle disease, flooding, crop failure, ransoming, abandonment of lands, local governmental corruption, and a demand for 4,000 soldiers.\textsuperscript{118} Notably the county was under considerable pressure around this time, possibly also involving problems with soil exhaustion.\textsuperscript{119} Similarly “the people” of Teviotdale in Scotland claimed to have suffered greatly after the Battle of Neville’s Cross (1346) because of the deprivations of both Scottish and English armies — and resulting land confiscation — so that they had to petition king and council for aid.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{113} SC8/109/5405; Strachey et al., Rotuli Parliamentorum, ii, 349; Jennifer Ward, “Essex and the Hundred Years War,” Essex Journal 51.1 (2016): 9–18; for a prolonged case see SC8/109/5448.

\textsuperscript{114} Ormrod, “Murmur, Clamour and Noise,” 137.

\textsuperscript{115} SC8/53/2642; see also SC8/114/5662; Calendar of Close Rolls 1302–07 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1908), 327.

\textsuperscript{116} Raoul Lemprière, History of the Channel Islands (London: Robert Hale, 1974), 30–31.

\textsuperscript{117} SC8/118/5884.

\textsuperscript{118} SC8/6/259.

\textsuperscript{119} Mike Osborne, Defending Lincolnshire: A Military History from Conquest to Cold War (Stroud, UK: History Press, 2011), 54, 58, 67; Dorothy Owen, Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire (Lincoln, UK: Lincolnshire History Committee, 1971), 140–141; Graham Platts, Land and People in Medieval Lincolnshire (Lincoln, UK: Lincolnshire History Committee, 1985), 153–154, 242; Stewart Bennett and Nicholas Bennett, An Historical Atlas of Lincolnshire (Hull, UK: Hull University Press, 1993), 52–53.

\textsuperscript{120} SC8/143/7139.
Most northern hardship petitions however were the direct result of Scottish warfare on English communities and surrounding lands. After the English defeat at Otterburn in 1388 the “poor lieges and inhabitants” of Westmoreland, Northumberland, and Cumberland petitioned king and council for exemption from the fifteenth due to Scottish devastation causing the populace to be close to abandoning the area. By 1390 the Scots were raiding as far south as Appleby, Brough, and Langton (Westmoreland). Notably throughout the 1380s and 1390s there was also a credit crisis on the northern borders, probably connected with these disturbances — though also due to problems in Flanders. The area’s instability continued into the fifteenth century with “frequent low-grade tit-for-tat raiding, periodically flaring into more sustained campaigning.” In extremis, Scottish raiding even pushed the northern religious community to unite as when in 1330, clergy of the bishopric of Durham; the counties of Northumberland, Westmoreland, and Cumberland; and the archdeaconries of Richmond, Cleveland, York, and the East Riding petitioned king and council for relief from payment of tenths, claiming that they were so impoverished that they could no longer function as religious communities. In this instance the situation was the result of sixteen years of Scottish dominance in the North following the English defeat at Bannockburn in 1314. Serious problems as a result of warfare and other forms of disorder then, as with individual towns, villages and religious houses, were very much on the minds of those wider collectives petitioning the king’s government.

121 SC8/218/10868; see also Calendar of Patent Rolls 1388–92 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1916), 203–204; Cynthia Neville, Violence, Custom and Law: The Anglo-Scottish Border Lands in the Later Middle Ages (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 67, 78.
122 Henry Summerson, “Crime and Society in Medieval Cumberland,” Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society 82 (1982): 116.
123 Pamela Nightingale, “Finance on the Frontier: Money and Credit in Northumberland, Westmorland, and Cumberland, in the Later Middle Ages,” in Money, Prices, and Wages, ed. D’Maris Coffman and Martin Allen (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 124.
124 Anthony Pollard, “Northumberland in the Fifteenth Century,” in A Northumbrian Miscellany, ed. Elizabeth Ashton et al. (Northumberland, UK: Northumberland Local History Societies, 2015), 70.
125 SC8/173/8625; Calendar of Close Rolls 1330–3 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1898), 77–78; for regional pressures see Nightingale, “Finance on the Frontier,” 118–120; Chris Briggs, “Taxation, Warfare, and the Early Fourteenth Century ‘Crisis’ in the North: Cumberland Lay Subsidies, 1332–1348,” Economic History Review, 2nd ser., 58.4 (2005): 639–672.
IV. ANALYSIS

Petitioning concerning serious poverty and hardship came from both towns and villages and religious houses in differing amounts but with surprisingly similar proportions overall and war being the most important issue throughout. Petitions from groupings of communities divide down into general concerns or, most commonly, warfare and disorder. These conclusions are unsurprising considering that for most of 1250–1450 England was at war with France, along with military campaigning within the British Isles. That said, when we examine impoverishment petitions in the context of all petitions submitted, a more nuanced picture emerges. In the 454 impoverishment petitions from 1250 to 1450, in 1250–1299 there were 29 petitions (6.39%); in 1300–1349, 265 (58.37%); in 1350–1399, 112 (24.67%); and in 1400–1449, 48 (10.57%). Most petitions then came in the fourteenth century and most, as has been seen, in the period between 1300 and 1349. Part of this peak might simply be because of the growing availability and popularity of petitioning. Indeed when we compare the raw data for impoverishment petitions against all surviving petitions, we see a similar set of peaks — if on a smaller scale (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Impoverishment Petitions versus All Surviving SC8 Petitions, 1250–1450 (x10)](image)

However impoverishment petitions as a percentage of all petitions offer a different profile (Figure 2).

126 For petition survival see Dodd, “Parliamentary Petitions?” 12.
Figure 2: Impoverishment Petitions as Percentage of All Petitions by Decade

Ignoring the periods 1250–1269 and 1440–1449, which account for less than 200 petitions per decade and therefore skew percentages, three important features are still recognized. First, in line with an early fourteenth-century economic crisis, there is a definite rise in impoverishment petitioning as a percentage of all petitions up to the 1340s. There is a peak around the 1315–1317 famine and subsequent cattle diseases and another more pronounced peak in the 1330s–1340s, mainly before the plague outbreak in 1348, which argues also for the impact of the Scottish and French wars. Second, there is a dramatic fall in impoverishment petitioning when it might otherwise be most expected, namely following the 1348–1349 and 1361–1362 plague outbreaks. This again emphasizes that due to the overwhelming nature of the crisis, petitioning communities were not bothering to request royal aid to deal with the plague’s impact. Finally, there was another upsurge in impoverishment petitions in the 1370s. This

127 Most notably see Campbell, Before the Black Death; John Drendel, ed., Crisis in the Later Middle Ages: Beyond the Postan-Duby Paradigm (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015).

128 For background see Chester Jordan, The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7–42; Iain MacInnes, Scotland’s Second War of Independence, 1332–1357 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2016), 157–183; Christopher Allmand, Society at War: The Experience of England and France during the Hundred Years War (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1998), 131–151.

129 For general reaction to the Black Death by the English Government see Mark Ormrod, “The English Government and the Black Death of 1348–49,” in England in the Fourteenth Century, ed. Mark Ormrod (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1986), 175–188.

130 E.g., see pp. 203–4, 210–12. Though this might also be connected with the considerable speed of the plague’s spread, as has been argued for religious
was probably due to the impact (including taxation) of the renewal of the French and Scottish wars as well as labour shortages resulting from plague outbreaks, flooding, harvest failure, and price rises.131

When we break these numbers down into our petition groupings, more trends emerge (Figure 3).

![Graph showing Impoverishment Petitions by Grouping]

Figure 3: Impoverishment Petitions by Grouping

Perhaps most notable here, aside from that already mentioned for petition concentrations as a whole (for example early fourteenth-century spike, 1350–1360s trough), is the considerable, sustained upswing in religious petitioning in the early fourteenth century, emphasizing that religious houses often portrayed themselves to be struggling then,132 a fact also reflected in wider religious community petitioning (11/12 petitions; 91.7%). However when we look at impoverishment petitioning as a percentage of all petitions through our three petitioning groups, the picture becomes more complex. When it comes to petitioning by towns and villages the peaks are similar, if somewhat more defined for the 1361–1362 plague outbreak, when communities were somewhat more willing to petition perhaps because the plague was a bit more of a known by this point. Nonetheless here at least, in the half centuries on either side of the 1348 outbreak, petitioning peaks for secular communities seem comparable, arguing against the economic impact of the plague communities.

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131 James Wood, “The Temporal Dynamics of the Fourteenth-Century Black Death: New Evidence from English Ecclesiastical Records,” Human Biology 75 (2003): 433–441.
132 John Hatcher, “England in the Aftermath of the Black Death,” Past & Present 144.1 (1994): 33–34; Gerald Harriss, Shaping the Nation: England 1360–1461 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 226–227.
133 Generally on religious houses petitions see Dodd, Justice and Grace, 248–252; Dodd and McHardy, Religious Houses.
alone on towns and villages and for a more sustained impact of an early fourteenth-century crisis throughout the 1300–1350 period, and not just in connection with the Great Famine of 1315–1317 and its aftermath.\footnote{For the urban experience in our period see Richard Britnell, “Town Life,” in A Social History of England, 1200–1500, ed. Rosemary Horrox and Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 134–178.}

Wider petitioning also has a clearer — if limited — rise in the 1370s, probably connected with the problems in the decade mentioned above. However what is really noticeable here is that religious houses took to impoverishment petitioning earlier in the fourteenth century — and in a somewhat more sustained manner — than secular communities. If in other words secular petitioning communities portrayed themselves as struggling during an early fourteenth-century crisis, they were following something of a tradition established by religious houses decades before (\textit{Figure 4}).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{impoverishment_petitions}
\caption{Impoverishment Petitions as Percentage of All Petitions by Grouping}
\end{figure}

When we break the numbers down by petition causes (where given), we see not dissimilar peaks to the raw numbers (percentages of all petitions are too small to be useful here) in \textit{Figure 3} — though emphasizing, as in the first three sections, the direct and indirect impact of war (especially Scottish and French wars)\footnote{For example buying off the Scots. Colm McNamee, “Buying off Robert Bruce: An Account of Monies Paid to the Scots by Cumberland Communities in 1313–14,” Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society 92 (1992): 77–89.} as a reason for petitioning (\textit{Figures 5–7}).
As for geographical spread of impoverishment petitions, there are again some notable trends. Where counties are identifiable, fifty-six petitions come from Northumberland; thirty from Yorkshire; twenty-seven from France; twenty-two from Cumberland; twenty-one each from Ireland, Sussex, and Wales; nineteen from Lincolnshire; and eighteen each from Suffolk and Hampshire, with the remainder throughout England and Scotland.
Northern England’s predominance (Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmoreland, Lancashire, Durham, and Yorkshire), with 129 of 454 (28.41%) petitions, emphasizes the problems with Scottish raiding as well as often tense relations between northern noble families but also connected economic issues.\(^{135}\) However aside from the North the heaviest petitioning comes from outside England, with France, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland accounting for 78 of 454 (17.18%) petitions. Indeed combining northern and foreign clusters (207/454 petitions; 45.60%) — representing almost half of all serious impoverishment petitions — also reinforces connections between an early fourteenth-century crisis and border warfare, with a later bump arising from the problems of the 1370s–1380s (especially renewed Scottish and French warfare) (Figures 8 and 9).

\(^{135}\) Neville, *Violence, Custom and Law*; Anthony Tuck, “The Emergence of a Northern Nobility, 1250–1400,” *Northern History* 22 (1986): 1–17; Bruce Campbell, “Nature as Historical Protagonist: Environment and Society in Pre-Industrial England,” *Economic History Review* 63.2 (2010): 290–291; Benjamin Dodds,
The lack of petitions from these areas in the 1350s and 1360s is also notable, again fitting with the idea that petitioning during the aftermath of the first plague outbreak of 1348–1349 was considered of limited value. However these concentrations of impoverishment petitions, especially visible in Figure 9, also show the impact of regular physical threats to the fringes of English royal power. They likewise indicate a greater willingness of such communities (or at least their elites) to petition and perhaps even at times to encourage a more communal spirit in the face of isolation and adversity. Moreover these petitions make clear that such communities, though often in conquered areas, felt that they had a right to state their case beyond local or regional authority, frequently to the king himself. The English monarch might have had his rights of overlordship, but even in these far-flung territories, so too did his vassals believe they had a right to their survival and safety.136

Then there was the question of who was being petitioned in the king’s government. Where was it thought that such requests had the best chance of success? Of those known, 210 petitions went to king and council, 172 to the king alone, and the rest to the commons, lords, the chancellor, the prince of Wales, or other officials — or to some combination thereof.137 Considering the volume of petitions going to the upper reaches of the royal government, the number addressed to king and council is not unexpected. However more surprising is that so many went just to the king — perhaps in the belief that a request to the monarch himself was the most direct route to success. This was especially true of the 1300–1349 period when over half as many (91) went directly to the king as to king and council (156) — notably most of those to the king came from the Church.138 This again emphasizes the serious problems of the early fourteenth century that communities felt needed to be heard specifically by the king. Even greater proportions of king-only petitions, if fewer in numbers, are found for 1350–1400 (37 to king/45 to king and council), 1250–1300 (19/9), and 1400–1450 (25/0) (Figures 10–13).

Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: The Evidence from Tithes, 1270–1536 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007), ch. 3.

136 For development of regional venues of complaint see David Green, “The Hundred Years War, Colonial Policy and the English Lordships,” in The Hundred Years War: Part III, Further Considerations, ed. Andrew Villalon and Donald Kagay (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 250–252.

137 For addressees see Dodd, “Parliamentary Petitions?” 32–44. Remember, of course, that at times “departments of state could be bypassed, their officers suborned or bullied, and the distribution of favour and patronage effectively usurped by the dominant interest at court.” Malcolm Vale, “Courts,” in Government and Political Life in England and France, c.1300–c.1500, ed. Christopher Fletcher et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24–40.

138 These often involved considerable legal knowledge however. Anthony Musson, “Petitions of Supplication and Litigation Strategies: Petitioning
Figure 10: Addressees of All Impoverishment Petitions

Figure 11: Addressees of Secular Impoverishment Petitions

Figure 12: Addressees of Religious Impoverishment Petitions
Despite the ever-growing bureaucracy around the monarch then, it was still to the king himself that many of his subjects looked to for aid. As for governmental responses as endorsed on the petitions, there were 47.5 approvals of secular petitions in some form, 3 refusals, and 41.5 referrals to other authorities; for religious petitions there were 67 approvals, 7.5 refusals, and 76.5 referrals; and for wider groupings of communities there were 23 approvals, 1 refusal, and 13 referrals. This demonstrates not only a reasonable level of success for all groups (137.5 approvals versus 142.5 referrals or refusals) but also an awareness by the administration that most petitions needed to be seen to be given some form of consideration. Finally, as throughout this article, most serious impoverishment petitions were requesting some form of leniency (say, concerning tax or fee payments, the restatement of rights) rather than active aid (such as money, materials). Communal petitioners asked for many things, but again they also knew what was asking too much of the king’s government.

V. CONCLUSION

A number of important conclusions are evident concerning serious impoverishment petitions. First, despite representing a smaller group of the English king’s subjects, there is a predominance of religious over secular communities when it comes to petitioning. This indicates that for the
1250–1450 period, priories, nunneries, hospitals, monasteries, and abbeys, especially smaller ones, were the communities that portrayed themselves to be struggling most often. And in this they represent something of the reality facing many late medieval religious houses. Despite the fact that many historians now argue for a more optimistic view of the later medieval Church more generally, and most recently the ability of monasteries to provide charity, they also show many smaller religious institutions and some larger ones going through serious economic struggles.

Some historians have further narrowed down the problems to the later fourteenth century while, at least from the evidence presented here, most religious institutions were complaining in the first half of the century. Indeed if the secular community felt itself to be struggling in 1300–1349, the religious community was a canary in a coal mine for the economy and society more widely, showing itself to be affected earlier and in a more sustained manner. This emphasizes the importance, when discussing an early fourteenth-century crisis, of not just focusing on towns and villages: religious communities, perhaps with less wealth stored from the thirteenth century than their urban counterparts, showed the willingness to petition earlier and in greater number. Also as noted, eleven of twelve wider ecclesiastical petitions (involving groups of houses) were submitted in 1302–1335, accounting moreover for all wider petitions in this period, showing a Church perceiving itself to be under considerable stress. When we think of an early fourteenth-century crisis then we must remember that such pressures tended to affect all communities within society.

Conversely in 1350–1399 petitioning from towns and villages peaks earlier, though whether this is because the secular community was hit earlier and harder by the Black Death, because religious houses were unimpressed with the efficacy of petitioning earlier in the century, or due to some other reason, is difficult to tell. Also notable was the somewhat increased frequency of petitioning from wider secular groupings in this later period, perhaps indicating a more collective approach to late fourteenth-century problems (Figure 4).

141 Most notably see Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, C.1400–C.1580 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
142 Neil Rushton, “The Forms and Functions of Monastic Poor Relief in Late Medieval and Early Sixteenth-Century England,” in Scott, Experiences of Charity, 105–127.
143 See Bernard, Late Medieval English Church, 181.
144 Martin Heale, ed., Monasticism in Late Medieval England, 1300–1530 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 6, 10–14.
145 See Figure 4.
146 This is despite increasing attempts to control finance in the later Middle Ages. See Alisdair Dobie, “The Development of Financial Management and Control in Monastic Houses and Estates in England c. 1200–1540,” Accounting, Business & Financial History 18 (2008): 141–159.
Mainly however the similarities are what stand out in impoverishment petitioning, surprising in itself given the different placing of secular and religious communities within the wider society and differing rules of engagement. Nonetheless in all of our three groupings, environmental factors were low down the list of petitioning priorities despite having a considerable impact on prices, wages, and demographic trends.147 As discussed, this is perhaps due to the realization of the limitations of a medieval king’s government — even if it wanted to help — faced with extreme weather conditions or widespread diseases.

Somewhat more important was petitioning concerning rights and privileges, in which both types of communities were active when facing threats to their survival. It is worth noting here however that while secular communities were usually petitioning in defence of an economic and legal position hard won in the thirteenth century, religious institutions often petitioned in reaction to systemic problems, again emphasizing the somewhat deeper Church difficulties in the later Middle Ages.

But of greatest importance to secular and religious communities — and groupings of communities — was the impact of war and disorder, especially in border areas — though notably internal strife and military provisioning were somewhat more important than the effects of open warfare for secular communities. War and disorder requests made up roughly half (224.5/454; 49.45%) of serious impoverishment petitions in 1250–1450. Communities felt they had the right to petition in extreme circumstances, quietly holding the king’s government to account when faced with threats to their survival. The large number of petitions also made clear that at least by contemporary accounts and underemphasized by modern historians, not only was war an important component of any early fourteenth-century crisis — a point brought into sharp relief by Briggs and Slavin148 — but all types of communities recognized and articulated this fact and tried to find succour for its effects from the king’s government.

This similarity of experience is apparent in petition addressees, with the predominance of king and council petitions but also a surprising number of impoverishment petitions to the king alone. Moreover petitioning communities of all types — or those in their employ — were thoughtful about not only who to petition but how much to ask for and, perhaps most importantly, how to ask. Indeed there was a nuanced sense of the presentation of a serious impoverishment petition, as toned by a lawyer or clerk (legal or

147 Campbell, “Nature as Historical Protagonist,” 281–314.
148 Briggs, “Taxation, Warfare,” 639–672; Slavin, “Warfare and Ecological Destruction,” 528–550. However northern England could also benefit from warfare. Richard Lomas, “The Impact of Border Warfare: the Scots and South Tweedside c.1290–c.1520,” Scottish Historical Review 75.2 (1996): 167.
ecclesiastical), and how to get a hearing from those in power. This is made clear in a reasonable level of petitioning success and the very small number of petitions with an unmitigated negative response. That said, the language at this level of need was not overly formulaic, whatever the petition’s original source.

Perhaps in part due to the petitioners’ heightened emotions in the face of extreme circumstances resurfacing in the compositions of lawyers or clerks, perhaps their relative rarity versus other petition types, no set vocabulary existed for pleading extreme need. For example, though variations on “impoverishment” and “destruction” appear regularly,\(^{149}\) there is no oft-repeated phraseology around them. Nonetheless taken together these petitions also show how contemporary ideas of deserving versus undeserving poor, while not visibly feeding into the royal treatment of petitions, perhaps influenced how communities packaged their own problems to best effect. In particular it toned the thrust of their petitions overall, making clear that the request involved extreme circumstances mainly not of the making of the communities themselves. Even then petitioners had to judge, as we have seen, what problems were beyond the royal government’s ability to solve.

Moreover such petitions show an awareness of a common good in extremis both by communities and the king’s government. From what we have seen, for communities such a common good was in the interest of sustaining the whole community in situations where it could otherwise, quickly or slowly, go into terminal decline. Whether due to warfare and disorder, economic or environmental circumstances, petitioning communities, usually through their most prominent members, looked to avoid circumstances that threatened communal survival. According to Rawcliffe “civic authorities and other members of the mercantile elite espoused a growing commitment to matters of communal welfare, over and above the specific needs of their own families and households.”\(^{150}\)

That said, it was again a definition of the common good in extremis that recognized the limits of the royal administration’s resources. For the king’s government the common good in extremis is less easy to define, but the fact that it did not deny most petitions outright but where necessary referred them onward or at times agreed to them indicates that the Crown saw not only the need to give such petitions due consideration as part of the king’s exercise of good Christian lordship but also some need to consider their

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\(^{149}\) See for example SC8/257/12844; SC8/58/2866; SC8/219/10902; SC8/271/13516.

\(^{150}\) Carole Rawcliffe, Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2013), 4 (original emphasis). For cooperation over competition see Susan Reynolds, “Medieval Urban History and the History of Political Thought,” Urban History 9 (1982): 14–23.
claims for the sake of the welfare of the whole kingdom. After all, the interests of the English Crown were bound up with the health of local communities, and if the latter became unable to sustain various financial and material expectations then the Crown’s position would begin to falter as well. Finally as the English Crown’s use of contract (paid) armies in place of the traditional feudal array grew,\textsuperscript{151} so too did the importance of the economic welfare of communities expected to help pay for those armies.

But what we see in serious impoverishment petitions goes beyond this. There is in many requests a sense of the changing perception of later medieval law and order and the idea, at least, that while the king’s law ran in all areas under the king’s rule, communities also felt that they had the right to petition the king if such laws were not being obeyed. In other words something of a pushback came from local communities against Kaeuper’s transition of a law state to a war state in the later Middle Ages,\textsuperscript{152} with the idea that the common good (including the safety) of the locality could take priority in extreme circumstances — even before the needs of the king’s armies. We see this in border areas of the English king’s dominions but also in England itself, with secular and religious communities petitioning for exemptions from war taxation and other exactions to ensure their continued survival.

Further, in the way the Crown dealt with these petitions, the power dynamic that governed relations between communal petitioners and Crown, while in the first instance was ultimately dominated by the king’s government, also shows that the king’s government would not, as we have seen, out of hand deny requests in the vast majority of cases — they had to at least be seen to be considered.\textsuperscript{153} Perhaps most importantly in the longer run for the health of the kingdom as a whole, such petitions were also valuable feedback from the localities, which, if used as a barometer of local social and economic health, could not only increase the overall productivity of the realm (profits, taxes, loans, and so on) but also ultimately strengthen the English king’s hold in those areas through the constant reminder that aid and largesse in the last resort arose from the Crown.

The evidence presented in this article moreover shows, as we have seen more or less constantly throughout the examples given, that most serious impoverishment petitions did indeed usually have a fairly firm

\textsuperscript{151} See Christopher Allmand, \textit{The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, c.1300–c.1450} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch. 3.

\textsuperscript{152} Kaeuper, \textit{War, Justice and Public Order}.

\textsuperscript{153} Whether this can be seen to be a more active policy to help various communities, at least going from petition responses, is difficult to tell. For a wider consideration of such a policy see Buchanan Sharp, “Royal Paternalism and the Moral Economy in the Reign of Edward II: The Response to the Great Famine,” \textit{Economic History Review} 66.2 (2013): 628–647.
foundation, at least in terms of the seriousness of conditions many communities faced. Going by their historical circumstances these were not primarily communities trying to cheat or defraud the royal government as some were with other petitioning\(^{154}\) — rather they were in serious situations where they felt themselves genuinely in need of substantial assistance or else they would face real, possibly terminal, problems. The fact that most communities, secular or religious, realized that there were situations where the king’s government could not be expected to help, such as those connected with plague and flooding, further reinforces the point that there was a level of discernment and self-awareness on the part of the communal petitioners. Finally the overall concentration of petitions for serious poverty and hardship in the first half of the fourteenth century clearly reinforces the problems in that period for both secular and religious communities\(^{155}\) — problems that fit well with the idea of an early fourteenth-century crisis in England and its dominions, long before the first ships carrying the plague landed at Melcombe Regis in the summer of 1348.

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\(^{154}\) Bridbury, “Provincial Towns,” 1–24; Dodd, Justice and Grace, 275–276.
\(^{155}\) Their problems were part of wider medieval problems with individual poverty. Dyer, “Poverty and Its Relief,” 42–43.