

Foligno county (Umbria, Central Italy) in the long twelfth century (1070s–1200s): An outline of the economic transition¹

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Foligno county is a small rural region in Umbria, forming part of the Duchy of Spoleto since the Lombard conquest to the adherence to the Papal States circa 1200. Its population was composed of the indigenous Roman population and assimilated Lombards, descendants of *arimannii*, free peasant-warriors constituting local aristocracy. Towards the 1080s, they led the peasant way of life. A few ecclesiastical and aristocratic manors (four or five, with five to ten dependent families in each, under obligation to the royalties and the socage—both of undetermined volume—to their lord) traced to the Lombard or Carolingian époques existed, but free peasants, with their agricultural explorations of five or six hectares comprised of morcellate parcels², dominated in local economic life since the sixth century³.

The only surviving collection of local documents—random non-cartulary private parchments showing land transactions effectuated by laypersons or ecclesiastical institutions—is that of the Benedictine abbey of Sassovivo, founded near Foligno in the 1070s under the patronage of the Count Monaldeschi. In the twelfth century in Foligno county there were around 50 parishes, each containing approximately 20 families (or 5000 souls in total), with ten to fifteen simultaneously active notaries each producing between one and two hundred charters annually; it follows that every year each family, regardless of social rank, commissioned an average of two charters. Thus, the 800 remaining charters of 1077–1200 represent approximately 0.5 per cent of the overall documental mass produced⁴.

The effects of the medieval warm period⁵—higher crops and population growth—accumulated slowly and imperceptibly for 130 years, achieving a bifurcation point in the 1080s. Rapid socioeconomic transformation started: overall growth of production and consumption, migration from the countryside to the city, increasing the commodification of agricultural products and land, as well as social hierarchization among peasants (with subsequent enslavement of their

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² The little modius (*modiolus*, abbreviated as l.m.), equal to 2254.08m², was the basic unit of area and parcel size.

³ For general characteristics of the regional context, see Chris Wickham, *Early medieval Italy: Central power and local society, 400–1000*, London, Macmillan Press, 1981; Alessio Fiore, *Signori e sudditi. Strutture e pratiche del potere signorile in area umbro-marchigiana* (secoli XI-XII), Spoleto, CISAM, 2010.

⁴ The method of calculation is set out in Emmanuel Huertas, *La rente foncière à Pistoia (11e-12e siècle): Pratiques notariales et histoire économique*. History. Université Paris-Est, 2008. French. <NNT : 2008PEST0227>. <tel-00468588>, pp. 60–62; Edition of the local primary sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries: G. Cencetti (ed.), *Le carte dell'Abbazia di S. Croce di Sassovivo, vol. I (1023–1115)*, Sassovivo I, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1973; V. de Donato (ed.), *Le carte dell'Abbazia di S. Croce di Sassovivo, vol. II (1116–1165)*, Sassovivo II, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1975; R. Capasso (ed.), *Le carte dell'Abbazia di S. Croce di Sassovivo, vol. III (1166–1200)*, Sassovivo III, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1983.

⁵ See Brian Fagan, *The great warming: Climate change and the rise and fall of civilizations*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.

majority); revitalization of archaic little manors; and the emergence of new ones in their image⁶. The result was the "feudal revolution"⁷ between 1100 and 1140.

The city of Foligno was the only (at least, partially) non-agricultural and clustered settlement in the county and an arena of rivalry for four equal actors: the bishop, the corporation of cathedral canons, the Monaldeschi family and the abbey of Sassovivo, all located in or around it the city. In consequence, its population had never been subject to any seigneurial power, and had been the unique source of craft goods for the countryside and a unique sales market for food. Its monopolistic character and longstanding concurrence among sellers urged them to lower prices through increasing the exploitation of peasants and creating conditions for the accelerated growth of the urban population, which in the 1200s was already between a third and a half of the rural population⁸.

To acquire a small parcel (0.2–0.5 hectares) and lease it to a neighbour by charter (*in scriptum*), to conclude a mortgage (*pignus, obligatio*), obliging the borrower to render a portion of yield from his parcel—between a third and a half of the yield—was a primordial microscopic and non-conflictual mechanism of enrichment used by wealthy peasants in the 1080s and 1090s.

In the 1100s, in case of default (true or false) in payment, they commenced to confiscate mortgage lands through the court under a local judge in countryside or an imperial one in the city, and to lease it. While 1105 dates the first evidence of land seizure for debts, in 1119, this practice already seems traditional for locals. The first information on the forcible seizure of all yield dates to the same year.

A few years later, in 1125, the first evidence of famine in the countryside appears. In the 1110s, the rising wave of land redistribution began to change the political equilibrium: the imperial judge and local judges, whose authority had no material basis, were no longer able to maintain legal order, and the population gradually began to seek justice from those with economic and social power: different ecclesiastical institutions, the comital family or one moneylender against another. The first act of arbitration dates to 1115, effectuated by a member of comital family and not by an imperial judge⁹.

The documentation of the 1140s–1150s contains traces of regularization of agrarian territory and final maturation of *iustitiae*: new peasant parcels of unprecedentedly extensive areas—10 l.m., or 2.2 hectares; previously unknown rectangular demesne fields; special lands for the village poor and widows, etc. This was accompanied by new control over place of burial and burial taxes, delimitation of parish borders, and a new *alberga* tax in favour of seigneurial sergeants (*valvassores*). This became a stable framework comprising a well-established range of structures, practices and possible personal trajectories¹⁰.

⁶ The term *iustitia* (local species of the *seigneurie banale*) as designating protection over a dependent person appears in the second half of the 1120s (*Sassovivo II*, doc. 203). In 1143, the same term already means power over rural territory (*Sassovivo II*, doc. 117).

⁷ This historiographical concept of Georges Duby is considerably refreshed and updated in Charles West, *Reframing the feudal revolution: Political and social transformation between Marne and Moselle, c.800–c.1100*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

⁸ Between 1100 and 1200, the population of Foligno grew from around 300 souls to approximately 2500. See Paola Guerrini, Francesca Latini, *Foligno: Dal municipium romano alla civitas medievale. Archeologia e storia di una città umbra*, Spoleto, CISAM, 2012, pp. 77–90; *Sassovivo IV*, doc. 201, 1211.

⁹ *Sassovivo I*, doc. 229.

¹⁰ Parish borders, new taxes (*alberga* and funeral tax), and regularized landscape (extensive demesne lands divided between *valvassores*, special lands reserved for poor), termed *usufructus* to designate rental concession and termed *servitium debitalium* for the unmeasured charge of the peasant family, appeared in the 1140s (*Sassovivo II*, doc. 105, 145, 234).

The communal regime in Foligno, consuls elected by the city population with power over the countryside installed the 1170s¹¹, would entirely rely on their ability to control the peasant population and extract more resources through the newly introduced public taxation. Erection of a new cathedral in 1133–1149, consecrated with great pomp, was a clear sign of economic growth in the city, as were the urban expansion in terms of area and the erection of six new parish churches, all during all the twelfth century. Allowing the urban population to have independent self-government—developing from the responsibilities of urban parishes' "advocates" of around 1100, through the *sors civitatis* (city quarter) tax units of the 1130s, towards the consuls with power both over city and countryside since the 1170s—seemed to each of the four actors better than open conflict with the remaining three, and led ultimately to the gain of a new communal elite over them in 1177, recognized by Frederic Barbarossa.

Thus, after a certain time, the strategy of food dumping not only stimulated the urban economy to expand, but also impoverished the peasants, reduced purchasing power, reduced demand of urban goods (and thus production), reduced the productivity and natality of the peasants, and affected the profitability of agriculture and grain prices as a whole. Coinciding with the moment of political ascension of the urban elite, interested in the persistence of such an order, in the 1160s–1170s, the economy stabilized in the state of crisis for a long period (almost until the thirteenth century) and transformed the character of urban society from a productive one to one predominantly founded on rentals. The inflation in Italy, caused by the coinage disorder during the Barbarossian wars (1154–1183)¹², enhanced this effect¹³.

The communalization of the 1170s didn't signify a simple victory of an old-school power group, but a qualitative transformation of the local institutional landscape, a microscopic sort of military-fiscal revolution: delimitation of the county, creation of a political structure (consulate) integrating all its territories under direct control, invention of public taxation, and creation of professional militia¹⁴.

The nature-caused avalanche of institutional creativity since the 1080s, having transformed the landscape, structures of production and social order, came to a logical end in the 1170s, when the institutions of power and extraction had matured enough to stagnate the local economy and to level off the effect of the good natural conjuncture still in force.

Preferring stability to growth and creative destruction and unwilling prejudice or prestige (for political reasons), to ease the tax pressure on peasants and to re-equilibrate the market through a necessary decrease in grain production, the elite directed all excess resources to warring with neighbouring cities, city development, war and increasing the number of soldiers and communal officials. After a century (1080s–1170s) of dynamism, the local economy returned to a state of stagnation. The concurrent urban food market as an axial local economic institution had been replaced by the state-run fiscal system of food extraction and redistribution¹⁵.

¹¹ The privilege of Emperor Frederic Barbarossa confirming power of the commune of Foligno of 1177 is published in MGH, *Diplomata regum*, X, 4, Hannoverae, 1990, doc. 1067.

¹² In 1155, Spoleto, 2 km from Foligno, was destroyed by Frederick Barbarossa. A permanent imperial military administration in Umbria was established in 1174 and headed by Konrad von Urslingen, Count of Assisi from 1174 and Duke of Spoleto 1183–1198.

¹³ Lucia Travaini, *Monete e storia nell'Italia medievale*, Rome, Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello Stato, 2007, pp. 104–109.

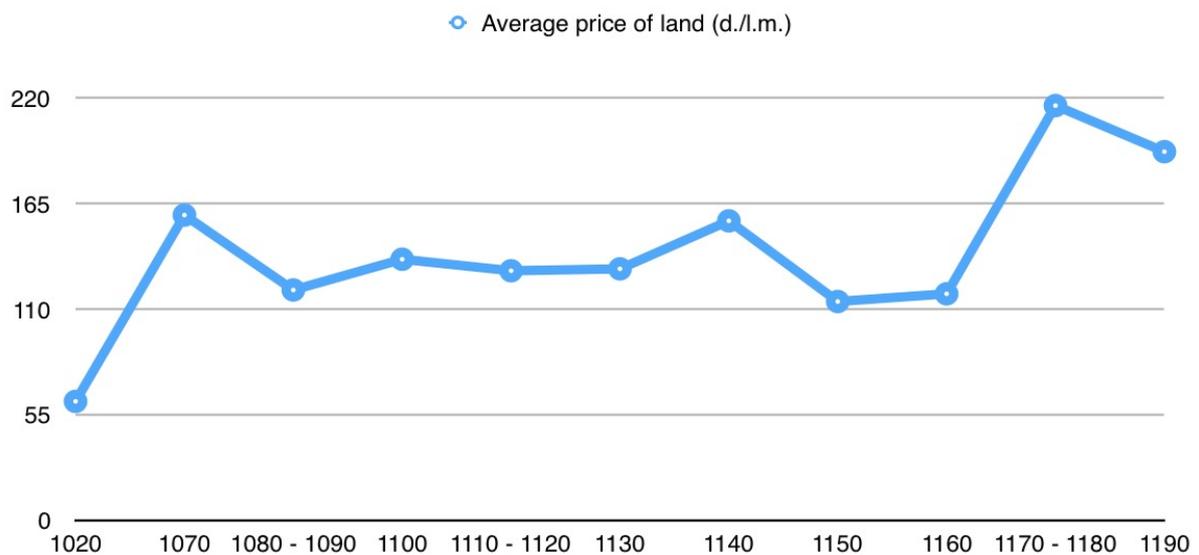
¹⁴ *Sassovivo III*, doc. 53, 1180.

¹⁵ Posterior constitutions of Foligno (ca. 1300) describe the system of bread distribution in detail. See Angelo Messini, Feliciano Baldaccini (ed.), *Statuta Communis Fulginei*, vol. 1–2, Perugia, Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria, 1969.

Strong and extremely durable extractive institutions¹⁶, as well as the hermetic elite, emerged on the wave of this growth. These were able to maintain a Stalinist model of economy based on state regulation and initiative, radicalizing social differentiation between the dominant city and the severely exploited countryside and with a policy of maintaining stability rather than encouraging economic progress and the growth of common wellbeing. The continuing population growth, renewability of principal sources of wellbeing and room for the extensive growth of agriculture (fertile wastelands) constituted a sustainable feeding source for this regime.

The 2.6 times growth of local land prices between the 1020s and 1070s is indicative of the general economic growth, slow and unnoticed by its beneficiaries, precedent to all qualitative transformations of local society and serving as their trigger. After a slight fall in land prices in the 1080s (by 15 per cent), coinciding with an explosive growth in the number of land transactions, they fluctuated (+25 per cent, 114–156 d.¹⁷/l.m.) on approximately the same level (135 d./l.m.) up to the 1170s, when the galloping inflation saw an increase to around 35 per cent (200 d./l.m.). Within a century, two major shifts in land prices coincided exclusively with changes in the ratio of the volume of goods and money supply (the intensification of land transactions in conditions of unchanged number of coins in circulation in the 1080s and uncontrolled coinage in the whole of Italy in the 1170s–1180s), reveals the commercial attitude towards land in local society and thus the direct link between land price and the food market (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1



The wave of pious land donations to the Church rose in the 1070s and peaked in the 1080s. Such an innovation in relations with the Church, a dominant local politico-economic actor, corresponds in a number of ways to a major restructuring of the social order under pressure of economic growth and increasing social differentiation. Large aristocratic donations reflect the growing convergence and empowerment of two halves (lay and clerical) of the local elite;

¹⁶ The mode of urban domination over the countryside, the grain procurement system and the conditions of life of peasants remained more or less same in 1305, when the Trinci family, a branch of the counts Monaldeschi, overthrew the communal government and became the hereditary seigneurs of Foligno, and in 1439, when the Pope placed the city under direct ecclesiastical rule.

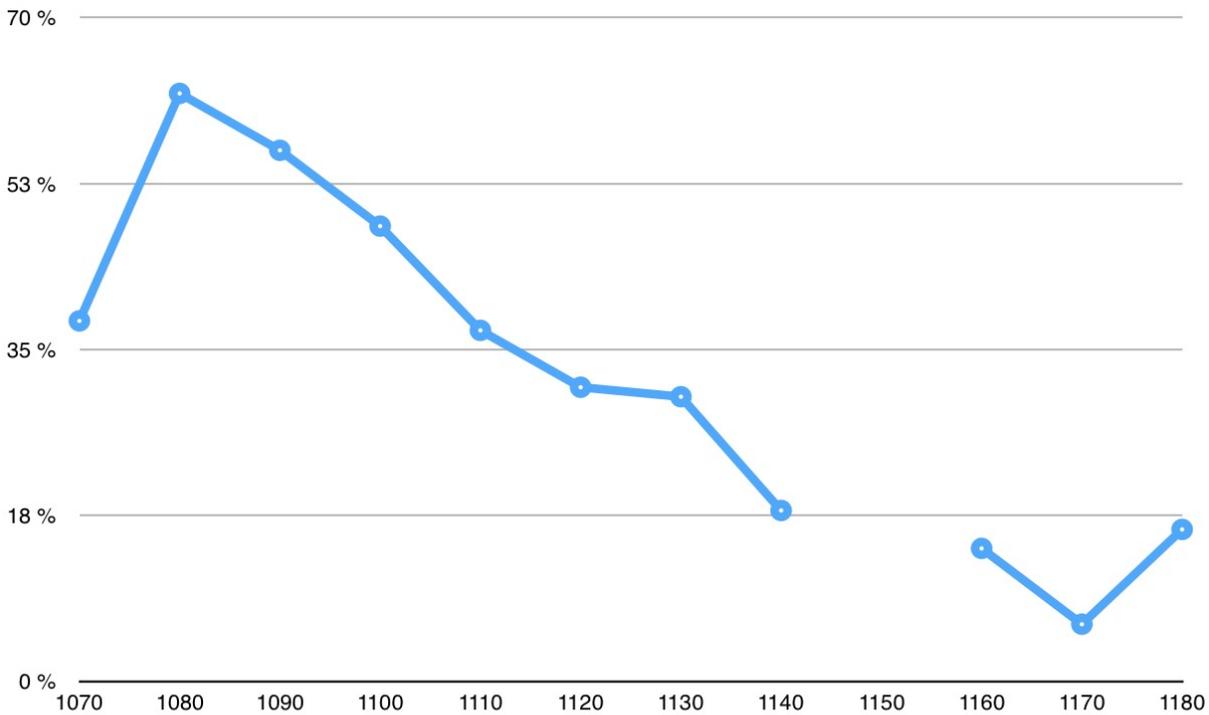
¹⁷ Abbreviation for the denarius (silver coin).

Fig. 2

○ Total number of surviving documents from Foligno county

Fig. 3

○ Percentage of pious land donations to the Church (with respect to the total number of documents)



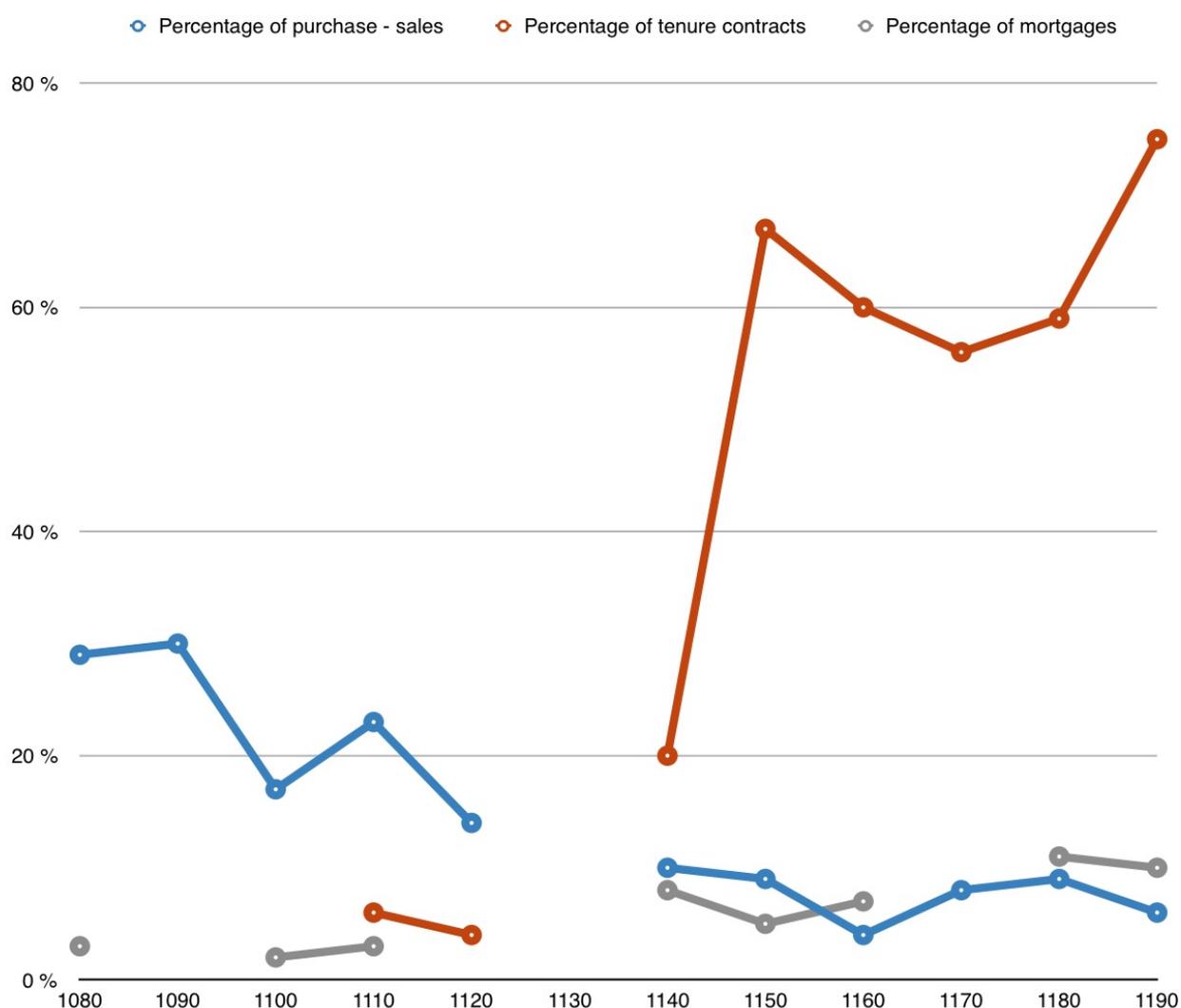
microscopic donations of freeholders show the need for ecclesiastical protection or alliance in the increasingly unstable social environment; and the peasant "donations"—charters of self-enslavement—show the new role of the Church as a feudal power. A gradual decrease in the number of donations towards the 1150s, while social life in general intensified, has two concomitant explanations. The redistribution of power, revenues and property in favour of the aristocracy which started in the 1070s/1080s was a finite process, which had slowed down in the approach to a new point of social equilibrium by 1140; later, its disturbance during the Barbarossian wars of the 1160–1170s slightly revitalized this practice. Additionally, the outburst of direct aristocratic violence around 1100 diminished the need for any written reflection (Fig. 2)¹⁸ and simultaneously made this process more intense, the written act covering larger volumes of objects, rights and persons (Fig. 3).

The emergence of land tenure contracts around 1100 marked the growing social value of land, social differentiation and so the debut of the feudal revolution. Land lease activity had known three periods by intensity, its increase being directly correlated to the growth of aristocratic puissance and the oppression of peasants. In the 1110s–1120s, it was a new and unusual practice, serving as one of the tools (alongside the mortgages) of social differentiation and concordance of interests between aristocrats and peasants, abdicating the property rights on their land in exchange for physical defence (Fig. 4).

The explosion of documental production in the 1080s (7.6 times more in comparison with the previous decade) was caused by the intensification of inter-peasant transactional activity, both purchases and donations. It reflected the emergence of a little aristocracy from the egalitarian

¹⁸ The 1130s, apogee of feudal revolution and aristocratic violence, is the worst documented decade in Foligno county in the twelfth century.

Fig. 4



peasantry and an initial market-explainable enrichment of the little aristocracy. However, its ongoing diminution from the 1100s—one decade before the outburst of nouveau-riches violence, the invention of private taxation and the appearance of land tenure—saw the qualitative transformation of this process into one of enslavement of peasantry and alienation from property rights. In the 1140s, after the final maturation of seigneurial structures, their number fell to under per cent and had been surpassed in number by contracts of tenure. In all later decades towards 1200, the number of land purchases balanced on a level of between four and nine per cent.

Mortgages appeared around the 1080s, simultaneously with the growth of purchase activity, both reflecting the growing commodification of land and intensification of monetary exchanges. They were an instrument of aristocratic oppression, but always occupied a peripheral place in local economic life. It was always seven to nine times less common than land purchase or tenure, accounting for two to three per cent of all local documents before the 1140s five to eleven per cent after.

In the twelfth century (at least, in 1132–1195), the normal effective interest rate of a Foligno agrarian mortgage consisted of one third of yield (designated in texts as *prode ut usus est*—"traditional interest rate"), set either directly or in monetary terms. This reveals not only a high

level of commodification of land and its products, but also the existence in local usage of a specific variable: approximate annual monetary income from arable land.

Alongside the existence of two mortgages from 1132 and 1195, with all quantitative parameters outlined and expressed in absolute terms, this knowledge gives way to a deeper understanding of local economic conjuncture and its development (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5

Year	Mortgage value / land price (d./l.m.)	Annual land income (d./l.m.)	Coefficient of profitability	Surplus labour intensity coefficient	Bibliographical reference
1132	120	72	0.6	1	<i>Sassovivo II</i> , doc. 87
1195	240	108	0.45	1.55	<i>Sassovivo III</i> , doc. 148

There are two additional derivative variables. The first, the coefficient of correlation of approximate annual income and mortgage value (land price), both expressed in money per unit of area (coefficient of profitability), reflects directly the level of profitability of arable land cultivation (where 1 indicates the equality of both variables—i.e. one year payback period, smaller result; longer payback period and thus lower level of profitability). This variable could reflect a fall in grain prices and/or a decline in labour productivity. The second coefficient is that of surplus labour intensity—the correlation of unit of land area, not mentioned in the loan agreement, which must be cultivated to repay the loan, in addition to that pledged as collateral, with the latter, taking into account approximate annual land income, loan principal and effective interest rate (if in money). It is 0 if there is no need to cultivate land other than that pledged as collateral, 1 if an additional parcel of the same area, etc.

The first of the said mortgages (in 1132) is a lease of 240 d secured on 2 l.m. of arable land for one year with an interest rate 4 d/month (1.67 per cent; 20.04 per cent of effective rate). The second (in 1195) saw a lease of the same amount for the same period, secured by a parcel half the size (1 l.m.), the interest rate being 3d/month (1.25 per cent), and the effective rate 15 per cent.

These data reveal several trends. The first two are the fall in the land profitability coefficient of 15 per cent from 0.6 to 0.45 and the augmentation of the surplus labour intensity coefficient of 35.72 per cent from one to 1.556. To repay the lease secured by the same parcel (1 l.m.), one had to cultivate 35.72 per cent more land in 1195 than in 1132: one and 1.5556 l.m. respectively). Both reflect the decline in grain prices and in labour productivity as a result of considerable aggravation of private, ecclesiastical and communal taxation of peasants, the economic and political enslavement (leading to a decline of labour productivity) and the consequent saturation of the food market.

The disproportion in these variables—35 per cent augmentation of surplus labour intensity and decline of proficiency of only 15 per cent—specifically shows the tendency to overcome the fall in food prices by doubling the enforcement of peasant oppression by the elite. In this regard, the doubling in land prices, from 120 d/l.m. in 1132 to 240 d/l.m. in 1195, could be regarded as a result

of three factors: 1) inflation; 2) the passing of property rights on land from labourers to a small and rich elite as a result of political and economic pressure; and 3) inclusion in the land price of its labour, becoming de facto unpaid and forced (due to indebtedness or taxation).

Two tenure contracts allow to imagine the growth of peasant vulnerability to the aristocratic despotism and the devaluation of peasant labor in the second half of the twelfth century - 17.5 times. In 1149 the price of land under 50 per cent of tax-in-kind was 5 times below market level, while in 1197 it was 2.9 times above (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6

Year	Price of entry into the lease of land (d./l.m.)	Market price of land in this period (d./l.m.)	Bibliographical reference
1149	24	150	<i>Sassovivo II</i> , doc. 147
1197	421	200	<i>Sassovivo III</i> , doc. 86, p. 263