

**Beggary, vagabondage, and poor relief:
English statutes in the urban context,
1495 - 1572**

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Statement of Authorship

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Abstract

This thesis revises the late medieval and early modern legislative foundation of public welfare in England, and many parts of the English-speaking world, which was later known as the old poor law. This thesis argues that the Elizabethan codification of legislation at the threshold of the seventeenth century was part of a much more stable statutory system than has hitherto been accepted. Examining the period between 1495 and 1572, this thesis charts the legislative system that provided for the punishment of vagabondage, the regulation of beggary and the relief of the poor. No study until now has questioned the statutory framework as it was understood in the mid-nineteenth century. This revision demonstrates the foundations of English statutory systems of poor relief to be a clear product of the Reformation, with continuity of concept and practice from the 1530s through until the Elizabethan codifications of 1598 and 1601. Similarly, this thesis demonstrates the continuities and anomalies in the statutory regulations for the punishment of vagabondage, and through a focus on beggary, refocuses scholarly attention on the specificity of these statutes within their contemporary context, without the lens of the mid nineteenth-century reformers whose histories of this period have influenced scholars for a century and a half.

Complementing this revision of the statutory regime for the punishment of vagabondage, the regulation of beggary and the relief of the poor is a specific examination of the impact of these statutes within the urban context through a study of the four county towns of York, Norwich, Exeter and Bristol. This has the twofold purpose of determining whether the urban experimentation model of statutory development, first outlined by E. M. Leonard in 1900, can be maintained as a viable explanatory model for the development of specific statutory mechanisms, and to what degree towns such as these followed statutory regulations. The result of these explorations is a newfound appreciation of the intersection of various levels of

government within Tudor England, which encompass the roles of legislation, urban officials and even parishioners within the urban context. This thesis not only argues that local government action needs to be understood within the contemporary statutory system and that statutory regulation needs to be appreciated in relation to local activities, but also that there was a greater degree of conformity with statutory regulations within four of the largest towns in England between 1495 and 1572 than has been generally acknowledged. As such, this thesis produces a dramatically new view of a systemically integrated polity in Tudor England.

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¹ 5&6 Edw.VI.c.2, SR 4, 131: from the title given to this statute