

Tally sticks in medieval Europe

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My paper will deal with tally sticks as an ubiquitous – but still understudied – tool of accounting and administration in medieval Europe. Researchers like Michael Clanchy, Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Moritz Wedell have emphasized both the potential and value of those objects not only for the social and economic history of the Middle Ages, but also for the intellectual history, history of numerical knowledge from an anthropological point of view.

Tallies were wooden sticks, mostly of hazel wood containing cuts and notches and thus documenting numerical information in different contexts, like debts, tax collection, trade and husbandry. Sometimes they also contain writings adding further information concerning dates, places and actors as well as reasons of payment.

My paper will focus on different contexts of use and functions in England and Europe. I will present examples of tallies as objects as well as written sources and pictures showing the use of tallies. I intend to finish my talk with some proposal regarding the interdisciplinary study of tally sticks as most valuable and ubiquitously used material objects for the analysis of debt relations and credit – this being my main research interest and background.

I will present the following contexts of use:

1. **Tax collection by the English Exchequer (12th to 13th century) – tallies from the National Archives** (including Jewish tallies)
2. **Medieval manorial administration and husbandry** (13th century tracts on agricultural and household administration)
3. **Use of tallies – examples from the continent** (German court records, Sachsenspiegel, pictorial sources)

From wood to paper: tally bills

Tally bills were chirografs and from an interesting source concerning their materiality, still closely related to the abbreviated form of the tally but in the form of a short written charter.

Summary – The function of tallies

- Accounting instrument for tax payments
- Notes payable (long-term credit)
- Tax-anticipation warrants (state credit)
- Postdated cheques (trade)
- Bills of exchange (private transactions, trade credit)
- Proofs in court, charter
- Means of quantifications

Tally sticks – an interdisciplinary project

- Linguistics (notches as alternatives to writing, historical semantics)
- History of law (status as proof, wooden charter)
- Economic and financial history (administration, documentation and control of debt relations)
- Archaeology
- Mathematics (numerical knowledge, history of numbers)