

# H-Net Reviews

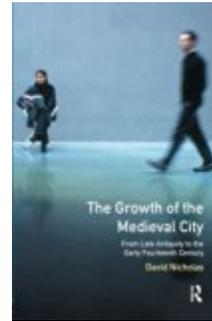
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Nicholas. *The Growth of the Medieval City: From Late Antiquity to the Early Fourteenth Century (History of Urban Society in Europe)*. London: Longman, 1997. xviii + 413 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29907-8; \$49.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29906-1.

David Nicholas. *The Later Medieval City: 1300-1500 (History of Urban Society in Europe)*. London: Longman, 1997. xiv + 430 pp. \$143.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-01318-6; \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-01317-9.

Reviewed by Paul Courtney (Leicester, UK)

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These two volumes form the first two of an intended four volume series entitled *A History of Urban Society in Europe*. For the purpose of the medieval volumes, the city is loosely defined to include English county towns and their Continental equivalents. The first two volumes are contributed by David Nicholas, professor of history and head of department at Clemson University, South Carolina. He specialises in the study of medieval Flanders, especially its cities.

### *The Growth of the Medieval City*

Part One (Chs 1-3) begins with a chapter discussing Roman urbanism. The administration and topography of Roman towns is discussed as well as the dramatic collapse of urbanism in the fifth century. The consumer basis (essentially parasitic on the countryside) of the Roman urban economy is stressed. The next two chapters document the rise of urbanism across Europe extending to the Slavic areas of the East. These earliest chapters are the weakest. The first two chapters, in particular, are too reliant on general surveys as sources and have a dated feel. Current key issues such as urban-hinterland relationships, political and social manipulation of consumption, Romanisation, and social space are mostly missing. These areas have been transformed by the large amounts of data produced by urban excavation and regional field survey (in what may soon be seen as a past golden age of European field archaeology), as well as by several methodological and theoretical revolutions in archaeology and related disciplines. However,

the results are still mostly to be found in the specialist archaeological literature. Nevertheless, students would have benefited from being steered towards such works as Esmond Cleary (1989) and Martin Millet's (1990) books on Roman Britain rather than volumes produced in the 1960s and 1970s. The discussion of the consumer city thesis does not use such useful up to date sources as Jones (1987) and Whittaker (1990). Strangely, Wachter's *Roman Britain* (1978), but not his major (1974) volume on Romano-British towns is cited.

There is a strong emphasis on topography, but without specific illustrations much of this must be difficult for anyone unfamiliar with these towns to follow. The volume is illustrated by a series of fourteen city maps at the end. It is no longer true that the major Dark Age emporium wick of Quentovic on the River Canche in northern France has not been located. Its site was discovered in the 1980s (see Hill 1990). Of the many references cited for Dorestad in the Netherlands, not one is to a work, many of which are in English, by its eminent excavators (e.g. Van Es 1990). Similarly on the wick at London various summary sources are preferred to Alan Vince's (1990) book which is the key work demonstrating its location. Surprisingly, the fierce debate over the royal control of trade in emporia, created by Hodges' (1982) work on the wick at Hamwih (Southampton), is not even mentioned apart from a unhelpful (for students) comment in the suggested reading list that his book, *Dark Age Economics* is controversial. It also seems likely, despite Martin Biddle's purely theoretical arguments, that the royal fam-

ily of Wessex dwelt at Southampton (close to Hamwih) rather than at Winchester before the ninth century (see Yorke 1982). Chapter Three on the tenth century urban revival picks up considerably, perhaps a reflection of the improving documentary sources. Nicholas argues (a la Duby) that the urban economy was initially geared to supplying clerical and secular elites and only gradually developed a wider commercial and manufacturing base. One might question, however, the extent to which ceaster (former Roman town), portus (trading centre) and burh (fortified place) were used distinctively in tenth century England. For example, Leicester (a ceaster) was a burh with a royal mint and Domesday market.

Part Two (The eleventh and twelfth centuries) sees the book come into its own. The importance of residences to cities is analysed as is the role their departure played in the decline of places like Aachen and Winchester. Planted towns are discussed, and Nicholas rightly differentiates between those on new sites and others developed on existing settlements. The reviewer would suggest that the Irish scholar John Bradley's term "promoted" town is usefully applied to the latter. Given their importance to medieval towns both commercially and ceremonially, it is nice to see an extended discussion of the topography of urban market-places. The changing nature of urban elites from those of landowning stock to merchants and the early rise of guilds is also covered in detail. Nicholas then goes on in Chapter Five to survey the rise of urban government, communes and revolts. Overall, there are a few questionable generalisations. One has to be very careful, for example, about using parish numbers as evidence of economic expansion or decline, as so much of their early history relates to power struggles over the possession of lucrative rights, especially burials. The Norman retardation of urban growth in England is also far from established. In any case, there was a European shortage of silver in the late eleventh century which might be an alternative explanation for lack of growth (Spufford 1988, 97). Nottingham's market is a classic planned market-place of "trapezoid" form, not of the "triangular" type which grew organically outside urban gates, as at Stamford and St. Denis. The topographic development of Lubeck has been considerably revised since the outdated sources used by Nicholas. The intramural market-place, for example, dates to after the erection of a river wall c.1220 which enclosed a previous market along the banks of the River Trave (see Elmers 1991 and Fehring 1989 & 1994).

Part Three (Chapters Six through Eight) looks at the period c.1190-c.1270. Nicholas examines demographic

expansion of medieval cities and their continued reliance on local as well as long distance trade. The problems of supplying cities with food are stressed and he suggests that cities became increasingly parasitic on their regions. However, this view needs to be tempered by the results of the Centre for Metropolitan History's Feeding the City project, which shows how London had a far ranging and complex impact on the commercialisation and intensification of agriculture in southern and eastern Britain (e.g. Campbell et al. 1993; see also Brandon 1971 and Campbell 1983). Such topics as urban elites, merchant guilds, occupational segregation, the land market, and public buildings are also covered. Chapter Eight is devoted to the municipal governments and guilds of thirteenth-century Italy. Part Four (Chapter Nine), entitled "A half century of crisis" sees the period c. 1270-c.1325 as a period of transformation in urban government with the rise of the occupational guilds, urban leagues (such as the Hanse) and city revolts as in Flanders.

#### *The Later Medieval City, 1300-1500*

This book with its shorter time frame is organised slightly differently from the first volume, with chapters arranged by theme rather than by chronology. It is also the strongest and most confident of the two volumes. Chapter One summarises the conclusions of the first volume in the series. Chapter Two addresses the growth of international trade by the fourteenth century, changes in the textile industry, the local food market and the realignment of the leading fairs. These issues are given a much less theoretical treatment than by Munro (1991) and Epstein (1994), neither of which is cited. The demographic crisis of the plague and its affects is then discussed. A section on urban decline in England gives no indication that this continues to be one of the most fiercely debated controversies of the medieval period.

Chapter Three discusses the topographic changes in late medieval towns, such as shrinking suburbs and more specialised and sub-divided market-places, the land market and occupational geography. Urban-rural economic relations are also discussed, though the emphasis is largely political and fiscal with little on the urban impact on the rural economy. Chapters Four and Five respectively cover city government (including conflict and political guilds) and the administration and finance of cities. Chapters Six and Seven review the social structure of cities from the elites to the poor as well as occupational guilds. Chapter Eight discusses women, children and religious minorities. Chapter Nine is concerned with urban education, crime and punishment, civic cul-

ture and display (e.g. processions). The final chapter is an essay entitled "The Tenure of Everyday Life." This evocatively describes the architecture and streetscapes of the late medieval city.

#### Conclusion

As Edith Ennen's (1979) briefer and more restricted, albeit ground breaking, *The Medieval Town* is long out of print, there is a major need for a general English language account of European medieval urbanism. Nicholas's two books are an ambitious undertaking in that they synthesise a vast amount of literature in many languages on cities or major towns from the fourth to fifteenth centuries over much of Europe. Inevitably, an author will make some errors venturing out of their own field in a work of this kind. It is particularly encouraging to see a historian make use of topographic, architectural and archaeological evidence. Too many of his colleagues think they can make sense of the medieval town without these vital and still largely untapped sources of evidence. However, there are places, especially with the early chapters of *The Growth* volume, where Nicholas would clearly have benefited from some expert advice on these fronts. Given his specialist interests in the Low Countries, it is surprising to find Vince and Schofield's (1994) archaeological synthesis on English towns and Schofield (1994) on London town houses being cited but not the seminal 1991 Douai conference papers (Demelon *et al* 1994), nor Laleman and Raveschot's (1991) magnificent monograph on Ghent's *steenen* (stone houses). Brachmann and Hermann's (1991) edited volume on the history of the medieval European town is also surprisingly missing from the bibliography.

Nicholas suggests that the differences between Italian and northern towns have been overemphasised. What is evident is that the interaction of northern and southern towns needs more analysis. The colonies of foreign merchants in all cities must have been an important node for the exchange of ideas and cultures (see Gaimster 1993). These two books are a valuable synthesis for anyone teaching urban history. They summarise a mass of interesting data on European towns with an emphasis on Italy, Germany, France, England and the Low Countries. However, in the classic medieval mould (at least in the English speaking world), they are stronger on thick description than on theory and explanation and often skirt around areas of fierce debate. The two books are particularly strong on social and governmental organisation in the high and late medieval city. Certainly, it should now be plain that the national study of medieval urbanism is

a totally inadequate base from which to explain an international phenomenon.

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A Response from David Nicholas, <NICHOLD@clemson.edu>

What an author cites in a work intended to be a survey inevitably reflects judgements concerning utility. In addition, these two volumes were initially conceived as a single book, but the bulk of material forced a division into two, and this decision necessitated expansion of some sections and contraction of others. I am familiar with most of the works that the reviewer faults me for omitting but for a variety of reasons did not include them here. For example, Epstein 1994 is a rather general discussion of trade that is only tangentially related to social and governmental relations within cities, which are the focus of all volumes in the series in which my two books appear. Given my special interest in Flanders, I wanted to avoid the pitfall of generalizing overly from conditions there. Thus, while Munro 1991 is missing from the Bibliography of *The Later Medieval City*, it is included in my *Medieval Flanders* (1992), to which it is more directly relevant. I gather that the reviewer is familiar with that book and/or some of my other previous work, since he thinks that I am still head of the Department of History at Clemson, a position that I held when *Medieval Flanders* appeared but which I relinquished in 1995.

It is unfortunate that the reviewer simply passes over the most important sections and theses of these two books, in what amounts to a "table of contents" review. I gather that he must have approved of them, but readers of his review will doubtless wonder what they contain. Instead, he concentrates on introductory or in some cases peripheral matters that were not intended to be as thoroughly documented as what followed. I concur with his judgement that the books are "stronger on thick description than on theory," for that was my intention in writing them. But his addition of "and explanation" is not justified. And while it is true that, in a comparative synthesis of scholarly literature that will be used by students as well as scholars, I tried to synthesize rather than emphasizing points of debate, the historiographical context is not ignored.

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