This is not so much a history of urban settlements in east-central and northern Europe as it is of the evolution of the idea of urban settlements in these regions, as described in literary texts from the Carolingian era to the early twelfth century. Rossignol (Assistant Professor, Memorial University of Newfoundland) therefore looks to non-Roman Germanic and Slavic regions of Europe. He documents the cultural history of the ways that Latin terminology born of the Roman Empire was later used and transformed over time to meet the needs of a wholly different cultural and geographical context.

Beginning with an historiographical excursus on how modern medievalists (Pirenne, Enne, Schlesinger, Haase, Le Goff, Pinol) have defined towns and cities, Rossignol rightly observes that their typologies reflect as much their own subjective expectations as moderns as anything about the actual Middle Ages. Archaeologists as well (Steuer, Hensel, Brather) have struggled in these regions of Europe to discern just when and where villages and fortified military posts developed into centers of trade and manufacture with a socio-economically differentiated population, and they remain without consensus. Perhaps the key insight Rossignol offers here is that the proffered typologies of modern historians and archaeologists have been heavily influenced by the type of sources used – a not insignificant point for his own book itself. By the time Marxist theorists (Herrman, Gieystzor, Lowmianski, Sombart), urban geographers (Christaller), urban sociologists (Weber, Sombart, Simmel), and urban studies scholarship are added to the mix, it becomes painfully clear that we are all caught in a semantic trap in which the object of our study has become an abstraction, the product of a typological debate which is quite unmoored from its medieval realities.

Rossignol’s solution to this intellectual rabbit trail is to apply a new method: combining a close analysis of the terminology used by medieval authors themselves (rather than by modern theorists), and then checking the idea of urban settlements in this literature against the material evidence from recent discoveries of archaeologists. Four distinct areas thus become the focus of the book’s remainder: Saxony whose urbanization was hastened by its integration into the Carolingian Empire, Slavic areas east of the Elbe River comprised of a multitude of peoples and ever-shifting alliances, the kingdoms of Poland and Bohemia from which stable dynasties provided the context for urbanization, and the Baltic Sea region of the Danes, Pomeranians, Prussians, Balts, and Swedes in which a similar pattern of Christianization and royal consolidation took place during the period under study. Of course, these regions appear in surviving
written documents at different intervals, Saxony first (9th–10th centuries), the Slavic regions (11th century), and then Poland, Bohemia, and the Baltic (late 10th–12th centuries), which does make a truly comparative study rather problematic.

Rossignol thereafter dedicates a sizeable second chapter (40 pages) to an exhaustive word study of civitas, urbs, castella and castra, with due attention to portus and emporium where appropriate. How then were these classical Latin terms for urban settlements adapted to the local conditions of east-central and northern Europe from the 8th to early 12th centuries? Whereas early Carolingian literary sources produced in the Frankish heartlands tended to describe the Slavic territories beyond the empire (about which they were poorly informed) as having castella/castra or military fortresses rather than true civitates and urbes, those texts written from within these territories (i.e. from the Annals of Fulda onward in time) did not hesitate to use civitas and urbs to describe all forms of urban settlement from fortresses to towns and even administrative districts. Thus the Frankish point of view, centered in the regions of the old Roman provinces, kept the traditional Latin usage of these terms whereas authors from east of the Rhine found it easier to be more flexible in describing their equivalents of urban agglomerations of any kind. And this perspective continued to move eastward as the imperial center shifted from Lotharingia to Saxony under the Ottonian monarchs, for whom cities became important centers of power: is it really surprising then that Saxon authors (from Widukind of Corvey to Thietmar of Merseburg and Adam of Bremen) would in turn refer to their own zone’s royal residences and episcopal sees as urbes and civitates while referring to the Slavic frontiers as having both urbes/civitates as residences and castella/castra as defensive fortifications? More important here should be the Ottonian introduction of municipium (Burgwarden) in Slavic territories as royal administrative centers, which by definition fused the notions of castella/castra with urbes/civitates and thus made for more interchangeable use of these four terms as all representing urban settlements of one kind or another – sometimes being both at the same time. In any case, by the early 12th century the rather abstract classical notion of civitas as opposed to castellum/castrum were amalgamated to describe centers of governance both military and administrative, around which suburbia of merchants and artisans would eventually form.

In chapter four, Rossignol then wisely checks these literary sources against archaeological sources, with an eye toward whatever subjective aspects might have influenced the authors just studied. This second substantial chapter reviews recent archaeological historiography complete with black-and-white photos, sketches, diagrams of fortresses of Saxony (Hünenberg bei Watenstedt), Greater Moravia (Breclav-Pohansko), and the Elbe River Valley (Pennigsberg, Leuthen-Wintdorf) juxtaposed against »princely fortresses« in Poland, Bohemia, and Pomerania (Oldenburg/Starigard, the Abodrite fortress in Old Lübeck, Magdeburg, Poznan, Prague, Kotobrzeg) and the Baltic emporia (Menzelin, Wolin) and fortresses (Daugmale). The results of these researches for the present study may not have merited so much coverage, and one finds merely that the locations of these fortress residences and fortified emporia were built on naturally advantageous elevated ground and intended to overawe the local population while
serving as an administrative centers and dynastic residences – in essence, a multi-purpose facility as described in the literary sources. And at best these remained modest, proto-urban centers whose literary descriptions were defined \( (\text{urbs, civitas, castellum, castrum, emporium}) \) and so forth) by the subjective decision of the authors given the clear multi-purpose functions of these urban settlements.

Two final chapters then move from the definition of various habitations to their inhabitants. Chapter five, yet another substantial chapter (62 pages), clarifies the expected reality that in such multi-purpose urban agglomerations one finds soldier garrisons in \( \text{a praesidium} \), merchants (at least in episcopal towns like Magdeburg and Merseburg and in \( \text{emporium} \) like Haithabu and Birka), and princely residences for king, bishop, or noble. And these inhabitants (though it never becomes clear just how long they were inhabitants over the course of a given year) were by the late 10\(^{th} \) or early 11\(^{th} \) century referred to in literary sources as \( \text{cives} \) – though this term was broadened to mean an inhabitant of a kingdom or territory and not just of a single urban settlement. Archaeological findings of at least Slavic sites from this time period make clear that social differentiation which might produce a distinct burgher class had not reached such a pronounced state, even if spatial differentiation had begun to define the separate spheres of clergy, elite laity, and others. Of course, we must also acknowledge that in such modest, proto-urban settlements one group’s spatial differentiation is another’s spatial proximity to them. Though there is sporadic evidence for more specific terms such as \( \text{milites, artifices} \) and so forth based on military and economic functions, the norm remained rather vague terms like \( \text{habitores} \) and \( \text{populus} \) which seem to function more as a means of social differentiation from the surrounding population of \( \text{agricolae, rustici and pastores} \) than between the urban dwellers themselves. When it comes to discerning whether any culture of urbanity or shared urban solidarity ever evolved by the 12\(^{th} \) century in any of these eastern and northern European zones (as it had in the Rhineland and parts further west), Rossignol rightly demurs, »Il est extrêmement difficile et délicat de répondre à une telle question« (p. 345). Indeed, given the mobility of the aristocracy, let alone the emerging merchant groups in this era, it is very difficult to assert the permanence of a given population over time in these settlements let alone any emerging social solidarity or communal movement sparked as a result. The conclusion proffered here is that, »Certes, cette forme d’identité était encore vague et hésitante, mais elle était bien présente« (p. 351), which is a thesis without much evidentiary confidence.

When all is said and done, the fundamental question remains: is it legitimate to call the \( \text{urban agglomerations} \) so considered at length in this book by the name of town or city? Archaeologists of these settlements have concluded that such a designation is inappropriate and excessive in its claim, though some might at least acknowledge the economic function of \( \text{emporia} \). And yet the contemporary literary sources indicate that their authors thought they were worthy of such a designation – within an eastern European developmental context: »La ville était resteé une forme d’habitat se distinguant de son environnement« (p. 358). Is there a way out of this \( \text{conundrum} \) that in contradistinction to modern typological discourse and to the objective archaeological evidence, medieval literary discourse from the region under study considered these modest, scattered, sporadically documented, multi-purpose
settlements worthy of terms befitting urban realities? Rossignol admits that we historians should consider accepting the medieval literary discourse: »En fait, difficilement« (p. 358). He then follows geographer Jacqueline Beaujeu-Garnier’s term »phénomène urbain« and modifies it to provide his solution: »phénomène proto-urbain«. If we reduce the literary witness to subjectively identifying a merely proto-urban phenomenon (as opposed to an urban settlement), we can grant that a process of urbanization was underway which was perceived rightly by contemporary authors. Indeed, »Au regard des résultats de cette étude, il apparaît futile de vouloir définir de manière objective la ›ville‹ du haut Moyen Âge européen« (p. 360), and thus if we think merely in terms of a »proto-urban phenomenon« being present, with all the required caveats this new term implies, we shall have arrived at the actual historical reality witnessed by contemporary literary authors. Given this thesis, the book’s title should have inscribed this perspective with something like: »Aux origines du phénomène proto-urbaine en Europe centrale et nordique«.

Some historians may likely conclude at this point that there is not much really new here regarding the history of medieval urban development in eastern and northern Europe except the coining of yet another modern typological term for urban history. This new typology creates space for medieval authors and their use of Latin urban terms for settlements we moderns would not consider towns let alone cities, and also suggests a process rather than an arrived-at destination. If so, they will surely critique Rossignol’s final assertion that this process toward urbanization was ruptured by western colonial forces whose descendants continue to define what an urban settlement is in our day: »Cette évolution fut toutefois rompue abruptement par l’arrivée des colons occidentaux« (p. 361), and thus the »deuxième révolution dans l’habitat« in which burghers learned municipal self-governance was »unfortunately« short-circuited. One senses a form of post-colonial restoration of indigenous voices here, but this may not be the conclusion of all readers.

My only methodological reservation is the use of a word-study from literary sources alone, which lack contextual and rhetorical analysis of their surrounding texts with which to help interpret the purposes of the terms so specifically identified. How a literary author used a term may be something quite different from why he used it. And since in eastern and northeastern Europe the admixture of fortified residences and proto-urban settlements was the norm, it would seem essential to include a close word-study of the Latin term oppidum alongside those of civitas, urbs, castrum, castellum. Though the term is mentioned briefly on pages 98, 110, and 279 it would seem an essential object of systemic analysis here since from the days of the Roman Republic it was used for urban settlements (one could even say towns) with economic functions (production, storage, and trade) as well as political and administrative functions; furthermore, they often originated as hilltop fortifications and thus the term typically designated a walled town in later centuries. So if a word-study of oppidum proved to indicate that it was used regularly in the literary sources reviewed in this book, we might well conclude that the integration of the terms civitas, urbs, castrum, castellum was not so remarkable a development after all, given the existence of oppidum as an already integrated term whose meaning had for centuries been located right in the semantic center of
these terms for settlements. Indeed, a fuller study of the non-literary corpus (especially royal and imperial charter evidence, as limited as it can be – for example, did Salian, Staufen, and even Capetian diplomata reflect a similar shift in the usage of urban nomenclature from the 8th to the 12th century?) would help to further contextualize the literary sources.

Though chapters three and four still read very much like his 2008 dissertation’s historiographical review, and though the Baltic region is not as represented as the title suggests, there is much to commend in this substantial study. Above all we must admire the linguistic capacity demonstrated by Rossignol, as there are few scholars west of the Rhine who have ventured to read so deeply not only in Latin but also in German and Slavic languages. And indeed it is impressive that his doctoral degree was jointly awarded from the universities of Lille and Göttingen. It will only be through such hearty scholars like Rossignol that we shall ever begin to bridge the linguistic and historiographical gaps that continue to hinder a truly pan-European history of the Middle Ages. We can only look forward to more trans-national, comparative work like this from Rossignol, and hopefully from many others. And should some readers find the book’s conclusions of limited value, all will nevertheless benefit from considering its rich and nuanced methodology, inclusive and integrative as it is not only of geographical and cultural categories but also in its use of literary, archaeological, social science theory, cultural discourse theory approaches.