German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Bd. 20
1998
Nr. 1
BOOK REVIEWS


These two books are part of a series intended to run to four volumes and to provide ‘a descriptive and interpretative introduction to European urban society from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century’. The two volumes under review here offer an account of the medieval city from Late Antiquity to about 1500. Like the volume by Christopher R. Friedrichs, The Early Modern City, 1450-1750 (1995), they are methodical and thorough, appropriately illustrated by maps and plans, and furnished with detailed bibliographies and suggestions for further reading. It is notoriously difficult to review textbooks, especially if they are as good as these two. One does not, and must not, expect particularly interesting new revelations in a textbook, but rather, comprehensive summaries of major themes and theories, and evidence to support them. This is precisely what these two books provide. There are only very few minor faults (certain misspellings), and it is particularly helpful for the reader that notes have been set as footnotes at the bottom of the page.

David Nicholas is a renowned expert on the history of Flemish cities, and his most important articles on that subject have been collected and published as Trade, Urbanisation and the Family. Studies in the History of Medieval Flanders (1996). However, in these present studies he succeeds in giving a well-balanced picture of urban development throughout Europe. In The Growth of the Medieval City he rightly focuses on the core regions of Latin Christendom: England, France, the Low Countries, Germany, the Iberian Peninsula, and of course Italy. The focus remains more or less the same in the second study. As Nicholas correctly points out early in The Later Medieval City, there are marked similarities between the urban landscape of 1300 and that of 1600. There remained a concentration of cities in northern Italy,
in the German Rhineland, and the Low Countries; London and Paris still overshadowed the urban development of other centres in England and France. What is new to the sixteenth century is the growth of Madrid and Amsterdam, of Munich and Nuremberg, the change in status of Antwerp, formerly a major city, now a ‘great’ one, and finally, the decline of the lesser Italian centres.

Nicholas deals with some eleven centuries in his first book, compared to a ‘mere three’ in his second, and this is the reason for the far more general nature of his account of the early origins in The Growth. This book is divided into four main parts, each reflecting the growing specialization within urban history: Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages; The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries; The Maturing of Medieval Urbanisation, c. 1190 – c. 1270; and finally, A Half-Century of Crisis, covering the period from about 1250 to the early decades of the fourteenth century. On the other hand, The Later Medieval City has no fewer than ten main parts, and here Nicholas is of course able to draw on documentation far richer and more comprehensive than is normally available for the earlier period. This is apparent, for example, in his treatment of the roles of women (pp. 258-77 on women in law, women in marriage, women as merchants, women in the crafts, woman in the Cologne labour market, women in domestic service, sexual behaviour, prostitution).

His main theme in The Growth is that a considerable element of urban tradition and continuity was fruitfully interrelated with innovation and change. If the surviving cities of the later Roman Empire mainly acted as consumers, at least by the early eleventh century they had become producers of valuable and often specialized goods. The lay élites of the early cities consisted mainly of landowners with strong ties to the clergy and local nobility, and despite the growing importance of merchants within these urban élites, Nicholas argues, it was the older and more established semi-rural group which led the move for political autonomy in their communities. It was only after 1270 that a more purely commercial élite controlled political power in European cities.

Moving on in time in The Later Medieval City, Nicholas first gives full attention to the economic and demographic changes in what he calls the last two medieval centuries. He draws a complex and well-balanced picture of a period rich in contrasts: growth and new opportunities for the wealthy on the one hand, urban poverty, class divisions, and
social unrest on the other. Nicholas discusses the growing urban bureaucracy, the composition of town councils, and the involvement of crafts and guilds in the political and economic administration of cities. There are some 200 pages on these matters, and although he tends to present a somewhat rough and arbitrary distinction between the south and the north of Europe (particularly when dealing with the financial aspects of urban administration), there is no shortage of very well chosen supplementary evidence from places a little more remote. He concludes The Later Medieval City with a discussion of everyday life.

Faced with such a wealth of information, a reviewer cannot discuss even in outline more than a limited part. This review thus focuses on the treatment of, and in particular the emerging contrasts between, English and German towns as they appear in The Later Medieval City. The first obvious point to note here is what appears to be a striking imbalance. Nicholas refers to twenty-nine English towns and they are very much the obvious choice, ranging in alphabetical order from Beverley to York, with all the major provincial cities and, of course, London. As far as the German evidence is concerned, no fewer than 41 individual towns are listed in the index. Again, this very much reflects the obvious. Local urban history has had a strong tradition in both countries; Nicholas is bound to concentrate on well documented places, and there were plainly many more cities in late medieval Germany than in England, which was considerably less densely urbanized in a jurisdictional sense. There are no obvious omissions in his choice of examples; it represents the wide variety of towns in the jurisdictional sense in both countries and Nicholas is clearly aware of the important distinctions between royal, seigniorial, and territorial towns.

The first opportunity for comparison arises early in The Later Medieval Town when Nicholas speaks of ‘The International Emporia’ with reference to the economic and demographic realignments which affected urban Europe in the later Middle Ages. He sees Cologne, Lübeck, and Nuremberg as such German emporia, dominated by a merchant élite and prestigious crafts that supplied the now all-important regional as well as a long-distance market for a wide range of consumer goods (p. 30). London serves as the obvious English counterpart here, and Nicholas rightly stresses the dominance of the city’s companies. There is a fleeting mention of the importance of the ‘home staples’ in fourteenth-century England, established for periods, for
example, in Newcastle, York, Lincoln, Norwich, Winchester, Exeter, and Bristol (pp. 42-3), but it is revealing that only Nuremberg receives a separate ‘mini-chapter’ as an ‘international emporium’ (pp. 37-8).

There is a greater degree of comparison when Nicholas deals with urban migration resulting from, or strengthened by, the outbreaks of plague from 1348; he quotes evidence from London and Exeter, from Trier and Cologne, from Hamburg, Norwich, Hull, and Lynn. The picture which emerges underlines that in both countries individual towns handled admissions to the freedom of the city in distinctly different ways. In England, York was relatively open to craftsmen, for example, while Norwich was less so, and Hull, Lynn, and Exeter admitted only a few (p. 56). In Hamburg the number of craftsmen which had formed some 37 per cent of all admissions between 1370 and 1387 declined to only 20 per cent in the second half of the fifteenth century, while at the same time the merchant element increased markedly. Sometimes relatively simple figures can have long-term implications: in Hamburg these figures clearly illustrate the decline of urban crafts and the consolidation of political power by merchants. Hamburg is just one of the major German Hanse towns where this was the case.

The question of citizenship in towns in both countries is fascinating. All over Europe citizenship was normally tied not only to residence and often to ownership of land, but essentially to formal acceptance. There was usually an entry fee which in Frankfurt, for example, was linked to the possession or purchase of urban property worth ten marks. Nicholas claims that the criteria for admission to citizenship were most restrictive in England, stressing that admission went hand in hand with membership of the merchant guilds in places which had them (p. 60).

Nicholas devotes five pages to the very English question of ‘urban decline in later medieval England’, though admittedly, the heading is followed by a question mark. At least to the German urban historian, there is something peculiar about English urban history: towns are placed in a hierarchy created by the intricate use of taxable wealth and population figures. The German evidence, or nationwide lack of it, has never permitted German urban historians to devote much time to this aspect, and thus Nicholas cannot put his summary in a balanced perspective. Nicholas rightly points out that the majority of English cities shared the continental pattern of decline in areas within, but close
to, the walls (p. 75) and he offers a balanced account of the evidence in Colchester, Winchester, Lübeck, and, fascinatingly, Duderstadt. Social topography features strongly in urban history; Nicholas draws on evidence from Cologne, Freiburg, and York in this context. The social history of medieval York has recently been exceedingly well researched by Jeremy Goldberg, and Nicholas gives Goldberg’s work the credit it deserves (pp. 82-8). One might have wished for a mention of Rolf Hammel-Kiesow’s equally useful work on Lübeck here.

When Nicholas concentrates on the town-countryside relation in northern Europe, he has, almost naturally, to concentrate on London for the English evidence. It is here that the reader finds mention of the English phenomenon of towns with county status (Bristol, York, Newcastle, and Norwich are the early examples). Although the German situation is greatly different, Nicholas does well in drawing the reader’s attention to the main cities of northern Germany which were largely de facto independent (p. 97), and then proceeding to the cities of the western part of that country (nicely set against the Flemish evidence here).

Nicholas understandably opens his account of urban leagues with the Hanse, and overlapping memberships (cf. the Saxon League, the Rhenish League, and the Swabian Confederation, pp. 103-104). There was no such thing in England, and this reflects concepts of medieval statehood and nation-state in England and Germany. Sadly, Nicholas fails to comment on this. In the same context, the English royal boroughs never matched the German imperial cities – Constance, Worms, Speyer, and Mainz being the most prominent – at least in jurisdictional status.

The intriguing and complicated aspect of the imperial Zunftordnung is beyond Nicholas’s chosen period, but he prepares the stage carefully by dealing in a most convincing manner with the subject of ‘city government and urban conflict’ (pp. 108-50). In some towns (here Nicholas uses evidence from Gloucester, Hildesheim, York, Exeter, and Constance, pp. 108-10) generally small, but sometimes significantly large, the burgesses’ organizations had to recognize, and not infrequently to fight against, the existence of an ecclesiastical body holding and exploiting a superior jurisdiction. The king was lord of most English cities. Although almost all English towns have preserved their own records, much of what is to be learned about them is contained in the rich archives of the central government (the Public Record Office).
Nicholas points out that the English kings did not suppress municipal institutions to the same extent as the French. It is telling that Nicholas approaches German towns via a detour through those of Bohemia and Bavaria here.

In addressing the question of the composition of town councils, Nicholas chooses to believe that most English cities remained under merchant guilds (p. 113), whereas most German city councils had a closely knit network of merchants and craftsmen. The number of city councillors (Nicholas should reconsider his frequent use of the term ‘patrician’, cf. p. 117) was certainly higher in Germany than in England, which raises some questions as to the efficiency of the German councils, and Nicholas is right in pointing out that the composition of the more important organs in German towns became rather static from the early 1320s. However, he equally rightly turns the reader’s attention to the complex question of why so many leading German towns faced major internal riots from the 1330s. Nicholas points to the internal hierarchy of guilds here as a major factor in these riots, and in the case of Augsburg in 1368 he goes so far as to call the events a ‘guild revolution’ (p. 121). He concludes that the ruling type of early guild regime in Germany was the merchant, and only to a lesser degree the rentier, but not the craftsman (p. 123), and he sees this as a major cause of internal discontent in German guilds even after these had achieved a considerable degree of administrative power. London features prominently in what Nicholas entitles ‘Urban rebellions of the fourteenth century – the second phase’ (pp. 132-4) and most revealingly, the author draws strong comparisons in this context with Hamburg, Constance, and Cologne. As far as fifteenth-century rebellions are concerned, the author concentrates on the well-known riots in the wendische Hanseatic towns. The evidence from London and Norwich, although contemporary, has entirely different causes and ensuing explanations, and seems a little far-fetched.

This is also the point where Nicholas’s style and use of argument border on the obvious (‘Elsewhere pressure from below enlarged existing councils, but did not create new ones. The council of Exeter doubled in size between 1435 and 1455 but then reverted to the older form’, p. 148). The analysis improves when Nicholas moves on to the élites of the later medieval cities. He addresses the question of ‘lineages’ (pp. 181-4), and illustrates it by referring to the family of Werner Overstolz of Cologne; he speaks of patrician society and provides a
good illustration by reflecting on the Circle Society of Lübeck (p. 188). When discussing continuity in office-holding, Nicholas refers to Adam Fraunceys and John Peyl. Another (adopted) Londoner was Richard Whittington, and Nicholas uses his case to show that despite strict regulations, there were chances for enterprising young men to rise from obscurity to prominence within the walls of late medieval towns.

This book does not have a conclusion – the evidence simply does not allow for one. The themes just pursued are among the many European ones which the reader can follow in Nicholas’s works, no less well ordered than well informed.

BÄRBEL BRODT has been a Research Fellow at the GHIL since 1994. She is the author of Städte ohne Mauern. Stadtentwicklung in East Anglia im 14. Jahrhundert (1997), and is currently working on civic administration and social control in England between 1400 and 1650.