

The medieval town

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The book is almost a century old, but medieval history is not changing very much. A good read.

This book covers medieval towns, urbanizations of upwards of 10,000 people usually, in the period of the 11th through the 16th century. Geographically it ranges from Lisbon in the West to Novgorod in the East, and Visby and Riga in the north to Palermo in the South. The central focus, however, is Germany.

The book shows how changes in technology and culture played together to modernize Europe coming out of the dark ages. The significant changes in physical technology included the introduction of sailing ships to replace human powered galleys, the continual introduction of better hull designs to improve the carrying capacity of merchant vessels, improved spinning and weaving methods, and improvements in metallurgy.

Still and all, the most important single invention may have been the printing press, about 1455. This was preceded by the introduction of written accounts and business correspondence a century or so earlier. It coincided with the introduction of universities, and a growing desire on the part of merchants to have their sons become lettered so they could carry on commerce.

This period saw a shift in power from the nobility and the church to merchants, artisans, and laborers. It saw the guilds come into existence and exert a great deal of power.

The evidence of some forms of democracy and almost all institutions is striking. Most towns were governed by a town Council. It was generally made up of some combination of leading merchants, guilds men, clerics and the local nobility. Whatever its composition, they were generally selected by a more or less democratic process from whatever restricted pool of talent the institutions recognized. In other words, there was a great deal of give-and-take and the leaders were elected by some sort of consensus.

The opening of this period saw the rise of the Hanseatic League, a group of port cities from Bruges, Belgium eastward to Riga in Latvia. Bruges, Hamburg and Lübeck, Germany seem to have been the most powerful. The central city in the complex was Visby, on the island of Goteborg in the Baltic Sea off the coast of Sweden. It was pretty much a confederation of city states; the Holy Roman Empire had splintered into competing principalities with pretty much the old order of social organization: petty kings, nobles, landowners and peasants. The church was well represented; Episcopal towns dotted the countryside. The cities, with their merchant class, especially of long distance merchants, increasingly change the social order.

In the early days of the Hanseatic League the merchants traveled with their merchandise. It was a good living, but risky. There were business risks and also the risk of robbery. With the introduction of written records in the 14th century more or less the businessman stayed put in the seat of business and sent representatives to other countries. Freight forwarding businesses arose to handle the physical transport.

The first great manufacturers were of fabric. The Italians imported silk to weave; the Flemish imported English wool to spin. The great weaving towns of Ieper, Bruges and Ghent grew up. Eventually they matured; there was conflict between the weavers and the owners of the looms. Moreover, the English figured that they could add some value by doing the weaving at home. The result was that Flemish weavers moved to England and a textile industry was founded there, to the great detriment of the Hanseatic League.

Nürnberg was the prime mover in the second half of this period. Whereas in Lübeck the old circle of merchants had closed ranks to exclude newcomers, Nürnberg was wide open for commerce. It was only somewhat favored by geography. It lies on the overland route joining the Rhine/Main River complex and the Danube Valley. It was a center of mining, and became a center of metallurgy. However, much like modern Japan and Switzerland, it owed its preeminence to the wisdom of the city fathers in establishing a Nürnberg brand name. Its metal products were renowned throughout Europe for their quality.

Nürnberg's near neighbor, Augsburg, participated as well in the wealth. The two of them became leading financial centers, although it was the Italians of this era who were the primary innovators in banking.

This book provides a good chronicle of the progress of modernity prior to the Enlightenment. People became worldlier, more secular, century by century. Even the Crusades, one learns, were driven by secular motives as much as anything else. The Hanseatic League was much involved, with the intent of forwarding their business interests. Toward the end of the period astrology was very prominent, often recognized as being in conflict with the teachings of the Bible. The book does not mention Galileo, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and others who lived just at the end of the period that it covers, but clearly things were changing.

This book is a valuable survey of European history in the first half of the second millennium. If it suffers a fault, aside from its age, it is that the translation is a little bit awkward. One does not find echoes of the German original. Rather, the English is just rather clunky. Too often it requires reading a paragraph twice in order to understand what it's about. It sometimes refers to cities whose names have changed. Ravel=Talinin, Dorpat=Tartu, Brunswick=Braunschweig, Breslau=Wroclaw.

The squib on the jacket compares it favorably with Henri Pirenne's "Medieval Cities," which appeared in 1925 and which I was required to read in(Reed) College in 1960. The opinion is that Pirenne's had socialist leanings. I might not have recognized them at the time, but given the politics on campus even back then, it is probably right. This is a valuable source. I leave it to others to note in comments whether there is anything more recent that one should also read.