Urban Europe 1100-1700

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This is an ambitious book, attempting as it does to span the whole of Europe and cover six hundred years of urbanism. It is also ambitious in trying to bridge the conventional divide drawn between the 'medieval' and 'modern' ages usually placed by historians and archaeologists somewhere between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The question is, does the book succeed in these aims? The short answer, I think, is yes, but it does so with two main shortcomings. One concern is the balance struck between detail and generalisation, and the other is the book's overall coherence. Both are perhaps a price that has to be paid for dealing with such a long time period and broad geographical area, which leads me to ask whether a project of this kind can really ever be successful? And yet, the need exists to occasionally take a longer-term view, especially when it comes to trying to understand how urban Europe was made – the main aim of David Nicholas's book – into what it is today.

Urban Europe 1100-1700 is presented thematically, with seven chapters dealing with particular topics that range across this chosen time-period. An alternative would have been to have had one chapter per century, each comprising elements of the topics that Nicholas examines, such as social structure and corporate urbanism, enabling the reader to see for themselves how a seventeenth-century town differed from, say, a twelfth-century one, or indeed how certain aspects of urbanism remained constant across time. Instead the book opens with a couple of chapters that attempt to look at the longue durée of second millennium European urbanism. The first of these is scene-setting and tries to set out what defines a town, as well as some general demographics of urban population change across the period.

Here two issues emerge which I think might have been addressed more directly: one is what defines a town from a city, while the second concerns what defines the 'medieval' from the 'modern'. In vernacular

English, for example, the word 'city' was becoming commonplace by the fifteenth century, yet the word 'town' persisted in a generic sense to mean an inhabited place – rural or urban. Nicholas slides between both 'town' and 'city' in his usage. There is also scope to discuss more specifically the perceived differences between 'medieval' and 'modern' urbanism and urbanisation – for a book such as this, with its broad temporal perspective, surely is a basis from which to challenge and even overthrow these very periodisations?

The second of the two introductory chapters draws upon what Nicholas describes as 'geographical theory'.(p. viii) By this he (by and large) means locational theory, used especially though not exclusively by human geographers to explain patterns of urban hierarchies and networks.(1) Influenced by the likes of economic giants such as Von Thünen and Christaller, Nicholas looks at the relationship between the city and its region, or hinterland, and its place in a broader urban system. This subject is a book in itself. Indeed, geographers were writing such books in the 1960s, Dickinson's *The City Region in Western Europe* being an example of this genre in practice.(2) However, today's urban geographers have abandoned central place theory and rank size rule as explanatory tools, and prefer instead the socio-spatial theoretical ideas of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel and Bruno Latour.(3) So Nicholas's use of 'geographical theory' in the chapter on the city and region is not quite so innovative as is made out in the Preface, and may even be viewed by some to be somewhat out-dated, although the empirical examples he uses in this discussion – for example, Cologne and London – are drawn from recent research.

With the remainder of the book, Nicholas moves from looking at inter-urban relationships to intra-urban characteristics and internal organisation. This is accomplished in four chapters that cover, in sequence, urban physiognomy, politics, society, and economy. Of these the author seems least at home with the first, and more confident on the more socio-economic aspects of urbanism to be found in the later chapters. This is understandable, considering Nicholas' particular expertise, but unfortunately it leaves the chapter on 'the morphology of the urban plan' looking weak and vulnerable. This is an area where recent geographical study might have helped, for urban morphology – the study of urban form – has increasingly begun to show how the layouts of towns and cities of Europe contain evidence in their forms of their origins and development, which when tied into written accounts and archaeological evidence provides a picture of the characteristics of urban landscapes and the processes that shaped them over time. Instead, Nicholas unfortunately falls back onto the artificial and unhelpful distinction that is often made between 'organic and planned towns'.(pp. 62-8) Conzen questioned this distinction long ago, and yet so often it still appears in print.(4)

It is unhelpful for two reasons. First, it oversimplifies the complexity of urban forms and their formation. Second, it draws a false connection between irregularity in form and 'organic growth' on the one hand, and regularity in form and 'planned growth' on the other. Urban planning takes many different forms and occurs at a variety of social levels and need not be manifest morphologically as 'regular' layouts of streets and plots. Conzen and other geographers have shown how past and present urban landscapes are composite in form, that is they are made up of discrete areas that reflect phases of development, even in cases of so-called 'new towns'.(5) These phases of development vary in terms of their degree of morphological regularity, and yet at one level or another are nevertheless 'planned'. Some degree of 'planning' is always at work in the making of urban landscapes, so to categorise towns according to whether their plans are 'organic' or 'planned' is to obscure the processes that formed them. 'Town foundation' is thus but one aspect of urban planning, and an examination of the forms of 'new towns' reveals great variety rather than conformity. This chapter could have benefited from more engagement with recent geographical (and historical) study of 'the morphology of the urban plan' therefore, and in doing so curious generalisations might have been avoided, such as 'the plans of the earliest cities were extremely irregular'.(p. 91).

If the first three chapters of the book might be seen to owe rather more to geography than history, the reverse is true for the last three, for here we see Nicholas providing a highly readable and thorough examination of what people did in towns and cities – how they lived and worked. Quite a lot of this, looking at the footnotes, seems to borrow on the author's previous works – and why not, since they are good sources to use – and again there are some odd generalisations (for example, 'prostitution was rampant' (p. 135), 'streets and squares of the pre-modern city were thus noxious and dangerous' (p. 160)) that might be queried; but on the

whole the student who may be reading this will be well-informed on certain topics, such as how citizenry was formed, or how urban inhabitants were educated.

All the time, though, the temporal balance seems to shift more towards the earlier part of the book's period than the latter, and the attention paid to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries especially begins to get reduced down a little to the familiar topics of religious discord, or the growth of printing. This again might be an argument for adopting more of a chronological approach in a book such as this – that the period being covered is somehow too stretched to work as a set of separate themes, for doing so means having to treat with some superficiality the specificity of certain moments in European urban history. It also has the effect of lessening the overall coherence of the book, for by the end of it we have lost sight of the introductory themes of long-term change set out at the start. The impression, then, given by the latter three chapters is that while they no doubt reflect (at least as far as the medieval material is concerned) the author's true expertise, they form a second book, distinct from the 'book' created by the first few chapters: it is as if the first three chapters are telling one type of story, and the second three tell it in another way. The short concluding chapter with its a long title requires perhaps a little more extended reflection to help bring the two halves closer together.

This book is undoubtedly a useful addition to a growing stock of recent books on 'pre-modern' European urban life. It sits alongside offerings such as Dyer's *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, Schofield and Vince's second and Europeanised edition of *Medieval Towns*, as well as my own *Urban Life in the Middle Ages*, among others.(6) While each of these books approach the subject of medieval urbanism from particular disciplinary perspectives, namely, history (Dyer), archaeology (Schofield and Vince) and geography (Lilley), they also blur traditional disciplinary boundaries. Nicholas's book is different to each of these in that it tries to cross the conventional medieval-modern divide (the others are concerned with the 'middle ages' per se), but it shares their interdisciplinarity.

To some extent this blurring of disciplinary boundaries is to be commended, for much is to be learned from sharing knowledge across history, archaeology and geography – not least when trying to make sense of remote periods of the past for which evidence is often patchy and can be usefully drawn together in ways that compliment each other (though not always of course). But there are difficulties and dangers in straying away from one's own disciplinary territory, as it were, and Nicholas' book (and mine too I might add) perhaps begins to highlight these.

At its simplest there is the matter of language, of using particular concepts from other disciplines. For example, Nicholas uses 'morphology of the urban plan' as the title for a chapter that in reality covers far more than the shape of town plans, dealing as it does with the 'occupational geography of the pre-modern city'.(pp. 75-9) If the focus of the chapter *is* the morphology of the urban plan, then I feel more ought to have been included on the formation and transformation of urban landscapes. But of course – as a geographer – I am perhaps bound to pick up on those points where it seems Nicholas is straying into 'my field', which raises the question of the appropriateness of trying to approach a subject by crossing disciplinary territories.

The broader issue, then, is how best to incorporate ideas, concepts and material from disciplines other to one's own. Again, Nicholas's book highlights the difficulty posed by this, in the way he draws upon 'geographical theory' long abandoned by academic geographers. While this in itself is no criticism of Nicholas – there is always more mileage to be had from applying old theories to new contexts and data – it means that geographers reading *Urban Europe* (as indeed they should) may view the book as 'out-dated', simply because of the use made of approaches that were around in the 1960s rather than those with which human geographers are currently working. I was conscious of this issue myself when writing *Urban Life in the Middle Ages*; how might historians view my attempts at raking over the work of Tait and Ballard, for example? Would this be considered in the same light that geographers now see the likes of Christaller and Von Thünen? The tide of theoretical faddishness within geography, and some other social science disciplines, does not seem to ebb and flow as fast in medieval history, and this, perhaps with some irony, makes it more acceptable for a historian to draw upon old geographical concepts than it does for a

geographer.

Interdisciplinarity is an important issue for medievalists quite simply because the field depends upon it. Moreover, interdisciplinarity is being pushed in the UK by the funding councils, as well as by some HE institutions, as well as the publishers of our work. The latter seem to favour it as a selling point. Palgrave thus informs us that *Urban Europe* 'will appeal to students and scholars of history, geography and urban studies' as well as 'sociologists and political economists' and 'urban planners'. Having read the book I do wonder whether it would really appeal to all these groups. I made similar claims for *Urban Life in the Middle Ages*, but are they justified? I am doubtful. Indeed a geography student will not pick up either Nicholas' book or mine quite simply because at the moment UK geography undergraduates (and sadly academic geographers more generally) just do not deal with the period of the middle ages (with rare exceptions), and typically venture only as far back as the 1700s.(7) The same may be said for sociology, urban studies and urban planning, all of which seem to me to hardly care for the middle ages at all.(8) So while publishers, institutions and funding bodies may all be pushing the need for greater interdisciplinarity, and while we as authors may use cross-disciplinary approaches and recognise their worth, and perhaps advocate that our books will have broad appeal, the reality is that in teaching and research disciplinary territories are more impervious than they are permeable – and doubtless all the more so because of the way recent RAEs ring-fence disciplines.

One field of medieval study where intellectual permeability genuinely seems to work is archaeology. As a subject area archaeology appears to draw happily from both geography and history, and at the same time also contribute to debates in each. This is to be seen clearly in Dyer's *Making a Living*, for example, as well as in Schofield and Vince's *Medieval Towns*, especially regarding the use of palaeo-environmental evidence (in the former) and documentary sources (in the latter). The work of archaeologists has less of a presence in *Urban Europe* than it perhaps might, and it is curious to note that among the wide number of disciplines the book is marketed towards, archaeology does not feature.

So because it seems that there is interesting work going on elsewhere, and because we are being led to do so by funders and publishers, we medievalists seek to look beyond our own disciplinary territories. But the danger is that what we borrow from other disciplines is at best seen to be out of date (especially by the discipline being borrowed from) or at worst ill-treated (by being misappropriated). This is a broad issue that those concerned with trying to write about aspects of medieval urban life need to grapple with, and should do so in an honest and open way that recognises the positive benefits of working across disciplines, but which also shows awareness of the pitfalls and possible shortcomings of so doing.

All in all, David Nicholas's book manages to cover a lot of ground in a relatively slim volume. It provides a good introduction and does try to give the student a broad overview of a very formative period of European urban history. Where I suppose I have most problems is with the earlier parts of the book, in part because I think the earlier chapters sit a little oddly in relation to the later ones, and in part because I think the attempts at bringing in some geography into what is ostensibly often the realm of history do not quite succeed. I admit, this criticism comes down to my own particular views of what geography is, and the feeling that Nicholas's idea of a geographical approach does not tally with mine as a geographer. Geography as a discipline has moved on from rank size rule, central place theory and the like, and yet to read *Urban Europe* a student (most likely of history) may be forgiven for thinking that this is still what urban geography is all about. There are more interesting contributions contemporary human geography has to offer to debates on urban life in the middle ages – to do with culture, landscape, identity, politics, gender, flows of ideas and commerce, to name but a few – than those that are represented in this book.

But equally I am aware that interdisciplinarity is the way forward, and the fact that historians are prepared to learn from geographers, and geographers from historians, is surely something that should be celebrated. To this end, notwithstanding my particular concerns over Nicholas's handling of geography, *Urban Europe* is to be commended to students of both disciplines, as well as to those of others too, for at the end of the day, any book that raises the profile of the importance of studying the middle ages to a wider audience deserves to be a success.

Notes

1. H. Carter, *The Study of Urban Geography*, 4th edition (London: Arnold, 1995).Back to (1)
2. R. E. Dickinson, *The City Region in Western Europe* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). Back to (2)
3. For example see D. Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); E. Soja, *Postmetropolis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); H. Thrift and A. Amin, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).Back to (3)
4. M. R. G. Conzen, 'The study of town plans', in *The Study of Urban History*, ed. H. J. Dyos (London: Arnold, 1968), 113-30. Examples being A. E. J. Morris, *History of Urban Form* (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 1994) and P. M. Hohenberg and L. H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1950* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).Back to (4)
5. Conzen, op. cit.. See also T. R. Slater, 'English medieval new towns with composite town plans: evidence from the Midlands', in *The Built Form of Western Cities*, ed. T. R. Slater (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), 60-82; A. Simms, 'The early origins and morphological inheritance of European towns', in *Urban Landscapes: International Perspectives*, eds J. W. R. Whitehand and P. J. Larkham (London: Routledge, 1992), 23-42; K. D. Lilley, 'Mapping the medieval city: plan analysis and urban history', *Urban History*, 27 (2000), 5-30.Back to (5)
6. C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages* (London, Yale University Press, 2002).Back to (6)
7. For example, see B. Graham and C. Nash, eds, *Modern Historical Geographies* (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2000).Back to (7)
8. P. Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998).Back to (8)

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