Urbanisation in Medieval Europe

From about the year 1000 it is much clearer to the historians that Europeans were beginning to get richer, although slowly. In the 12th century the evidence shows that important changes had already occurred. In the long run, as a result, more men were to acquire a freedom of choice almost unknown in earlier times: society became more varied and complicated. Slow though it was, this was to prove a many sided revolution. Wealth was to at last beginning to grow faster than population, and in Europe not all the new wealth was squandered by predators. Improvements by no means occurred everywhere, and it was punctuated by a bad setback in the 14th century. Yet the change was decisive, it launched Europe on a unique career of recurring growth lasting to the modern day.

Approximately one thousand years ago, the European continent entered a new phase in urbanisation. A complex interplay of demographic, economic and political factors led to the emergence of new cities that gradually grew in size and developed into regional and international modes for flows of people, goods and information. Although scholars have long debated the extent of trade and urban life during the early Middle Ages, there is general agreement that increased trade activity was evident before the crusades. With the ending of Viking and Magyar attacks in the tenth century, a northern trading area developed, which extended from the British Isles to the Baltic Sea.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries most parts of Europe were urbanised to some degree, in that they contained settlements which we can describe as towns, where there were relatively large numbers of inhabitants dwelling in close proximity and making a living predominantly from specialised crafts, exchange and other services rather than from agriculture. Terms denoting fortification and enclosure, such as burghs, burh and civitas were coming to be common indicators of urban status. The burghs was often a defended extension to an existing town, and townsmen were known as burgenses.

The centre of gravity of these networks lay first in the middle and northern part of the Italian peninsula, where maritime cities such as Amalfi, Genoa, Pisa and Venice were the first to profit from the revival of trade contacts in the Mediterranean world in the 11th century, after which cities such as Milan and Florence blossomed into important commercial and industrial centres. A second centre of gravity emerged in the 12th century in Northern France and the southern Nether- lands, where trade flows from the Rhine, the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea came together.

The centre of this northern trade system was the county of Flanders. By 1050 Flemish artisans were producing a surplus of woollen cloth of such fine quality that it was in great demand. Baltic furs, honey and forest products, and British tin and raw wool were exchanged for Flemish cloth. From the south by way of Italy came oriental luxury goods - silks, sugar, and spices.

A catalyst of the medieval commercial revolution was the opening of the Mediterranean trading area. In the eleventh century, Normans and Italians broke the Muslim hold on the eastern Mediterranean, and the First Crusade revived trade with the Near East. Arab vessels brought luxury goods from the East to ports on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. From there they were shipped by caravan to Alexandria, Acre, and Joppa, and from those ports the merchants of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa transported the goods to Italy on their way to the markets of Europe. Other trade routes from Asia came overland, passing through Baghdad and Damascus and on to

ports, such as Tyre and Sidon, in the crusader states. The easiest route north from the Mediterranean was by Marseilles and up the Rhone valley.

Early in the fourteenth century two more major trade lanes developed within Europe. An all-sea route connected the Mediterranean with northern Europe via the Strait of Gibraltar. The old overland route from northern Italy through the Alpine passes to central Europe was also developed. From Venice and other northern Italian cities, trade flowed through such passes as the Brenner, sharply reducing the business of the Rhone valley route and the famous fairs of Champagne.

The resurgence of trade in Europe was a prime cause of the revival of towns; the towns arose because of trade, but they also stimulated trade by providing greater markets and by producing goods for the merchants to sell. In this revival, geography played a significant role. Rivers, important to the evolution of ancient civilisations, were also important in the development of medieval towns. They were natural highways on which articles of commerce could be easily transported. We should none the less not lose sight of the factor contributing to the rise of towns was population growth. The 40,000,000 or so people of Europe, west of Russia in 1000 appear to grow to 60,000,000 or so in the next two centuries. Further acceleration in the growth seems to take the total up to a peak of about 73,000,000 in 13000. Thus, between 1000 and 1300 the population of western Europe almost doubled, and here and there even quadrupled. Urban population went up faster than rural in these centuries. In Britain, for example, the population more than tripled between 1066 and 1350. The reasons for this rapid increase in population are varied. The ending of bloody foreign invasions and, in some areas, the stabilisation of feudal society were contributing factors. More important was an increase in food production brought about by the cultivation of wastelands, clearing of forests, and draining of marshes.

The most fundamental stimulus to urban and commercial growth was that of rural development and population increase. This generated surpluses which in this period were transformed into more broad-based economic growth, especially in those regions where great estates fragmented, allowing freer movement of labour and crafts and more spontaneous market development. Some of the areas of densest rural settlement, were those of greatest urban growth. The correlation, however, was not always straightforward, and other factors were involved. Nevertheless, the basis of most towns' prosperity, and proportionally more so with the smaller ones, was interaction with the immediate hinterland. Barcelona's eleventh- century growth was based largely on its economic and political relationship with its hinterland.

The interaction between local resources and lordship shaped patterns of urban growth, especially for small towns. Devolution of authority to the nobility, or simply their growing wealth and avarice, promoted the construction of castles or other fortifications which became the foci for settlement and sites of trade. A few new towns grew up around a new castle or a new monastery. Sometimes this led to the establishment of a market. Many towns , especially in Germany, were deliberately settled as colonies. Many villages and small towns, in Italy as well as in northern, central and eastern Europe, originated in that way. The lord allocated land for building and provided the physical and legal protection, which, together with produce for sale and a demand for craft services, stimulated the market. Kings did the same in the estates they controlled. On the whole, long established towns grew bigger. They provided markets, or lay on great trade routes such as the Meuse and Rhine, or were grouped in an area of specialized production such as Flanders or Tuscany.

During the Middle Ages, polycentric networks of larger cities and smaller urban centres emerged in certain regions that performed regional and local administrative, economic and service-related functions. This was the case in Flanders for example, where in addition to the three large cities of Bruges, Ghent and Ypres, dozens of smaller towns gave shape to the urban network. This network reinforced the economic integration and geographical interdependence of the smaller units, as a result of which cities became increasingly connected to each other and to their hinterland. The dominance of the major cities did not result in a distinctly hierarchical urban system in Flanders, in contrast to Tuscany where the city of Florence gradually brought the surrounding smaller cities and rural communities under its authority and regularly waged war against other city states over the control of ports, markets and production areas. In England, London – which was in effect the capital of the kingdom by the end of the Middle Ages – acquired a very dominant place in the urban network. Around 1500, the city had effectively become the gateway of England, the port city through which the most important import and export flows went. The demographic balance between the English cities reflected this shift from various regional urban networks to one network dominated by the capital. At the beginning of the 16th century, London already had almost five times as many inhabitants as Norwich, the second largest city of England.

Along the main European trade routes, astute lords set up fairs, where merchants and goods from Italy and northern Europe met. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the fairs of Champagne in France functioned as the major clearing house for this international trade. Fairs were important and elaborate events held either seasonally or annually in specified areas of each European country. The feudal law of the region was set aside during a fair, and in its place was substituted a new commercial code called the "law merchant." Special courts, with merchants acting as judges, settled all disputes. In England such courts were called "pie-powder courts," from the French *pied poudre,* meaning "dusty foot." Fairs also greatly stimulated the revival of a money economy and early forms of banking and credit. A system of seasonal fairs developed in Lombardy from the tenth century onwards. In southern and eastern England, Flanders and parts of Germany fairs proliferated and gained regional importance from the late eleventh century onwards. Those of Champagne had a more remote ancestry but came to the fore somewhat later. Their situation on the route between Flanders and Italy, but also enjoying ready access to the valleys of the Meuse and the Moselle, together with the protection and careful management offered by the counts of Champagne, enabled them in the second half of the twelfth century to develop collectively as a major focus of international trade. The four comital towns of Troyes, Provins, Bar-sur-Aube and Lagny operated a cycle of six fairs throughout the year. They experienced a distinctive episode of urban growth as they acquired new streets and marketplaces to accommodate the traders, who initially had set up their stalls on the margins of the towns. Merchants from Arras and Flanders were present in the 1130s and from Rheims, Paris, Rouen and Limoges by the 1170s. The fairs linked and focused markets, thereby reducing the uncertainties and costs of long-distance trade. Italians, who frequented the fairs from the late twelfth century onwards, were an important element in their long-term success. The first Milanese to go north to buy their cloth did so in 1172. The increasing wealth and reach of Italian merchants reduced the northerners' ability and need to maintain bases in Genoa and other southern ports. At the end of the century the five main fairs of Flanders also developed an annual cycle, which was perhaps a response to that in Champagne, indicating a further stage of commercial integration.

These were significant changes, antecedents of the 'commercial revolution' of the thirteenth century. The extension and integration of trading systems over much of Europe facilitated local specialisation, and towns and regions came to be known for distinctive products.

Local exchange and the generation of wealth stimulated long distance commerce. A striking development from the beginning of the period, but especially from 1100, was the acquisition, by negotiation or force, of rights by merchants from one city in other cities under different rulers. These rights included freedom from tolls and sometimes the collective possession of a warehouse and lodgings, known in the south as the *fondaco*. Despite great differences in the scale and value of trade, these arrangements were fundamentally similar in the Baltic, North Sea and Mediterranean areas.

Much long-distance trade continued to follow long-established routes, but there were important changes. Developments in the Islamic world were influential. Changes in Iran and the Steppes diverted the trade in Indian and south-east Asian spices from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and so made Egypt and the port of Alexandria a prime focus in Mediterranean trade. The innovative agriculture and industries of Muslim regions stimulated trade between the eastern and western Mediterranean in the eleventh century, and subsequently between south and north.

Between the tenth and the late twelfth centuries a small number of Italian port cities played an increasingly dynamic role in Mediterranean trade, altering the pattern of exchange between east and west and strengthening the north– south axis in European commerce. There were several common factors in the success of these cities. Essential assets included their fleets and a capacity to control sea routes: Venice developed its shipping and naval strength by setting up its state-controlled Arsenal in 1104. Their situations on geographical and political margins enabled them to handle a transit trade in silks, spices and industrial materials such as alum and cotton from the wealthy Muslim and Byzantine markets, in exchange for primary materials such as timber, salt, iron (especially from Lombardy) and slaves, which were in short supply in the east. Their lack of productive hinterlands forced them into long-distance trade. Thus Amalfi became more prosperous than nearby Naples, which relied on exchange within its fertile territory and on its linen textile industry. The key to Amalfi's early success was its close relations with Muslim centres of trade, probably including Andalusia and the ports of the Maghreb and Sicily, and certainly Cairo; Amalfitans were also active in Constantinople and Antioch, all by the early eleventh century. Despite being forcibly brought under Norman rule in 1073 and losing commercial advantages to northern cities, Amalfi was still an important focus of trade at the end of the twelfth century.

The Italian trading cities owed much of their rapid increase in wealth during the twelfth century to the unprecedented prosperity of the Byzantine empire, which occurred in spite of its losses in Asia Minor. Rural production and population growth, not least in the capital itself, stimulated trade. Some provincial towns prospered as consumer cities dependent upon landed wealth, while others experienced commercial and industrial development, stimulated in some cases by state investment.

Throughout the period, the land routes through the western Alpine passes probably remained the principal means of commercial communication between north-western Europe and Italy, although development of ports to the west of Liguria suggests that routes along the Rhoˆne valley and through the county of Toulouse also came to be used. Trade from Venice through the eastern passes into Germany was well developed by the early twelfth century. The Ferrara fairs were important for Venetians as a place to meet merchants from Germany, as well as those who shipped their goods down the River Po. Later in the twelfth century Venice's northern trade was greatly stimulated by the new flow of German silver, and in 1228 the Venetians began to build for the Germans the Fondaco dei Tedeschi in the heart of the city.

Some of the largest and most populous cities owed their standing to their handling of a transit trade and to their role as centres for collecting and redistributing goods. Cologne gained a commanding position in the Rhine trade, served overland routes to the west and north-east, and also came to be an important market for the products of the Meuse valley. Mainz had similar position. Rouen controlled the valuable wine trade of the Seine. Lille appears to have prospered as a market supplying corn from southern Flanders to the expanding towns of the north. Damme, founded before 1180 as the outport of Bruges, soon came to specialise in handling wine and salt from France.

In the twelfth century the specialised craft came to occupy a more distinctive role in urban life than formerly. Linen and woollen textiles from the north; Silks from Constantinople; Linens from Mainz; Cheese and fish from Flanders, brass goods and wine from Meuse valley; Zurich supplied copper, Cloths and tin from Liege, Huy and England. Towards the end of the twelfth century Milan was becoming widely known for its production of armour and Pisa for its export of iron from the ore mined in its territories of Elba and Piombino. Salt allowed certain foods to be stockpiled and traded as standard commodities and was a staple of Lübeck's trade.

Cloths specifically from Flanders and Champagne appeared in the Genoese market, many northern French and Flemish textile towns were known in Genoa by their names, along with cloths from England and Germany. Market advantage and accumulation of skill, rather than the simple availability of materials, came to be key factors in urban industry. The weapons and armour produced in Cologne and Milan used iron from Liege, Bergamo and Brescia, not the immediate vicinity. In the brass- working towns of the Meuse valley, copper and tin were brought in over great distances.

Merchants from north of the Alps were regular visitors to Italy about 1020, bringing linen and woollen cloths, tin, swords, horses and slaves to the royal palace at Pavia. Arras tapestry imported into Italy. Italian merchants also travelled north. They were at Ardres, near Calais, in the late eleventh century "in order to do their business in England". The trade in woollen and linen textiles was above all responsible for strengthening commercial links between north. Some of these textiles were supplied to the local market in and around Genoa, but by the 1180s many of them were shipped overseas to substantial markets in Sicily, Constantinople, Syria, Alexandria and the Maghreb.

Building was one of the dominant characteristics of town life. In the towns of most regions there was a marked increase in construction from the eleventh century onwards. In the larger towns the framework of streets was inherited from earlier periods. New streets were inserted. Building encroached on to river frontages and marsh. Landlords and tenants subdivided houses and divided and built on open plots. The wide market street was a common feature, as in the fair towns of Champagne. In the south new towns were often laid out on a more or less regular grid, as at Montauban in 1144. Marketplaces, however, were often irregular spaces at castle, abbey or town gates, where roads converged. Many of the busier towns had more than one market focus. Assembly areas, courthouses and civic buildings were often situated where the chief market and the principal site of authority in the town adjoined, as in Cologne.

Remodelling of townscapes was commonly associated with the imposition of fortifications, and the rebuilding of cathedral and abbey churches. Commercial wealth could contribute to such programmes, which might express both the new power of the citizens and religious ideals of urban order. Town walls could be important

collective projects and the citizens of Genoa remodelled their harbour. The Pisans financed a cathedral building project that introduced a sense of Jerusalem to the city. In northern Europe, the growing landed wealth of ecclesiastical institutions and secular lords was a more significant element in these developments.

Rapid and disorderly urban growth generated problems of its own, of which the most serious was fire. In England, France and Italy towns were frequently devastated by fire. London's conflagrations led by the early thirteenth century to the formulation of sophisticated regulations governing building materials and the use of fire-proof party walls. Sanitary problems also generated rules concerning the disposal of rubbish and rainwater and the placing of cesspits, while archaeological evidence shows that street surfaces were regularly maintained, although not to the standards of classical times. In the thirteenth century an English queen of a century before was remembered as the founder of a public latrine in a busy waterfront district of London, demonstrating that the provision of basic urban facilities had come to be seen as an act of charity and a source of honour. There was an established tradition of canalising streams so as to provide power for town mills, drinking water and systems of cleansing. In some Italian cities ancient aqueducts had been maintained or restored. Sophisticated systems for piping drinking water from springs to cisterns or fountains were a feature of urban palaces and monasteries, but seem not to have been adopted for general water provision until the thirteenth century. Outside towns, the maintenance of roads and waterways was a matter of great interest to townsmen and their rulers. Ypres owed much of its prosperity to the canalisation of its river during the second half of the twelfth century. Bridges were another special urban concern and from the mid-twelfth century onwards there was a widespread programme of building or rebuilding town bridges in stone.

Townsmen and traders came to occupy an increasingly distinct role in the governance of towns. Throughout the eleventh century, in both north and south, the actions of groups of leading townsmen are increasingly evident. These associations were often short-lived, but could become established in the life and governance of a town. They were identified by many imprecise terms, including *burgenses meliores*, *primates urbis*, *probi homines* and *seniores*. Their membership and the degree to which it may have overlapped with that of other associations is often far from clear. In Italy and parts of France they commonly included landowning nobles and knights (*milites*) whose interests focused on the city. Such groups were sometimes described as communes and,. In the north these groups sometimes had more purely mercantile characteristics. The urban leaders who opposed their bishops or other lords were sometimes identified as merchants, as at Cologne and Cambrai in the 1070s.

An elite among the 'better citizens' sat on judicial assemblies and tribunals, under the supervision of an official of the lord of the town (bishop, count or king). Between the Seine and the Rhine these individuals were commonly known by the Carolingian term *scabini*. They were often rural tenants and dependants of the lord, who sometimes appointed them, but they also included merchants. In England their equivalents were known as lawmen or aldermen, offices which sometimes ran in families. Terms such as *barones* or *senatores* (Cologne, Ghent, London) were occasionally used to denote members of these tribunals, although it is not always clear that they had any more precise connotation than 'better citizens'.

The guilds played an important role in local government. Both artisans and merchants, even though freemen, were subject to the feudal lord or bishop on whose domain the city stood. The citizens of the towns resented the fact that their overlord collected tolls and dues as though they were serfs. The townsmen demanded the privileges of governing themselves-of making their own laws, administering their own justice, levying their

own taxes, and issuing their own coinage. Naturally the overlord resented the impertinent upstarts who demanded self-government. But the towns won their independence in various ways.

One way was to become a commune, a self-governing town. The merchant guilds took the lead in acquiring charters of self-government for the towns. Often a charter had to be won by revolt; in other circumstances it could be purchased, for a feudal lord was always in need of money. By 1200 the Lombard towns of northern Italy, as well as many French and Flemish towns, had become self-governing communes.

Where royal authority was strong, a town could be favoured as "privileged." In a charter granted to the town by the monarch, the inhabitants won extensive financial and legal powers. The town was given management of its own finances and paid its taxes in a lump sum to the king. It was also generally given the right to elect its own officials. The king was usually glad to grant such a charter, for it weakened the power of the nobles and won for the monarch the support of the townspeople.

Founding new towns was still another way in which feudal restrictions were broken down. Shrewd lords and kings, who recognised the economic value of having towns in their territories, founded carefully planned centres with well-designed streets and open squares. As a means of obtaining inhabitants, they offered many inducements in the form of personal privileges and tax limitations.

Interacting with the growth of towns was the decline of serfdom. Many serfs escaped from the manors and made their way to the towns. After living a year and a day in the town, a serf was considered a freeman.

The triumph of the townspeople in their struggle for greater self-government meant that a new class evolved in Europe - a powerful, independent, and self-assured group, whose interest in trade was to revolutionise social, economic, and political history. The members of this class were called burghers and came to be called bourgeoisie. Kings came to rely more and more on them in combating the power of the feudal lords, and their economic interest gave rise to an early capitalism. Also associated with the rise of towns and the bourgeoisie were the decline of serfdom and the manorial system and the advent of modern society.

Most of these developments were, ultimately, the outcome of trade. Outside Italy and a small area of the Low Countries the level of urbanisation was low, but there had been a remarkable increase in the scale of trade and manufactures and in the number and size of towns. Despite wide differences in climate, local resources, population densities, intensity of exchange and political frameworks, the experiences of different regions of Europe had much in common. There were two prevailing themes. One concerns the growth of population, rural resources and local exchange, already dramatic in northern Italy by the early eleventh century, but becoming apparent successively elsewhere. The other concerns integration and the degree to which markets, initially of localised scope and always doing much of their business in the immediate vicinity of the town, enabled towns and regions to develop complementary specialisms in manufactures or in handling primary goods. New landscapes of commodities and urban identities emerged. In particular, the urban network became more distinctly hierarchical, with certain key cities strengthening their commercial influence over widening regions, regardless of political structures. Especially important was the strengthening of links between the south and the north. While on the eve of the fall of Constantinople, European commerce and towns were still

not to be compared with their established counterparts in the Byzantine and Muslim worlds, they displayed a pattern of growth, an expansive force and a buccaneering spirit which indicated the future.

The New Trade Routes, 1200-1350 AD