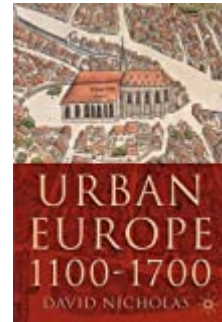


**David Nicholas.** *Urban Europe, 1100-1700*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xii + 239 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-94983-2; \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-94982-5.



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## The European City in a Nutshell

*Urban Europe, 1100-1700* contains a compact survey of the history and historiography on the pre-industrial European city in a broad perspective. Its handy format and attractive cover design, and especially the presentation and structure of the text, recommend it as a textbook for students of history, geography, and urban studies. David Nicholas is a distinguished historian with profound knowledge of the medieval history of European, and in particular of Flemish cities. His *Town and Countryside: Social, Economic and Political Tensions in Fourteenth-Century Flanders*, published in 1971, for example, was a pioneering study of institutional relationships between cities and their rural surroundings. Together with a great amount of historical evidence from various parts of Europe the book contains a theoretical framework in which the phenomenon of the pre-industrial city is approached from a sociological, political-economic, and geographical as well as cultural point of view.

The author deliberately chose an analytical approach, after presenting the historical evidence more extensively in his former publications, including *The Growth of the Medieval City: From Late Antiquity to the Early Fourteenth*

*Century*, (London, Longman, 1997) and *The Later Medieval City, 1300-1500*, (London, Longman, 1997). A theoretical concept that receives particular attention, both in the introduction and throughout the text, is Max Weber's urban sociology, "the profundity of whose observations on the nature of the urbanization process continues to impress me nearly a century after his death." Nicholas concentrates especially on the notion of rationality as one of the distinctive features of the European city, into which he also incorporates the receptivity to competition (p. 2). Another concept, which returns repeatedly, is that of the Central Place. The city is basically seen as a Central Place with functions extending far beyond the limits of the city itself. The central question of the book concerns the development of the basic functions of the city between 1100 and 1700, the period between the two industrial revolutions. The goal is on the one hand to show what the basic functions that called cities into existence were, and how these functions developed and diversified and caused such a high divergence among the European cities. Furthermore Nicholas wants to show what made the European city so attractive to immigrants in spite of the serious problems that characterized urban life.

The book is structured thematically: after giving a chronological survey of the rise and development of the European city in chapter 1, the urban phenomenon is first treated in a regional dimension (chapter 2: city and region). Here some of the basic concepts of urban geography are introduced. The actual point of departure for his analysis is the Central Place model, introduced by W. Christaller in 1932. He deals in some detail with the role of grain supply for the provisioning of the city and the attraction for immigrants. At this point, he introduces an excursion on the religious and ethnic clustering within the city (pp. 45-46). Other fields in which the city functioned as a Central Place were the financial functions for its surroundings. Credit was closely related to industry, because the latter was highly money intensive. This leads to the industrial relationships between town and countryside. Cities tried to protect their artisans from competing industries in the surrounding area that deemed to put them at risk. In another section the interaction of the town with the countryside is shown by means of the example of Cologne which has been studied in detail by F. Irsigler. Finally the relationship between cities and their regions are also treated on the political level. Besides the territorial power over the surroundings, juridical aspects such as urban law, citizenship, etc., are discussed in this section.

Chapter 3 focuses on the morphology of the urban plan. Here a first premise is the long-term continuity of the medieval morphology of the city, which was not fundamentally changed until the seventeenth century. Nicholas mentions the role of cathedrals and castles for the early rise of cities and makes distinctions between different European areas. A second aspect that is treated is the functional distribution within the city: commercial activities had the tendency to concentrate in the center while industrial aspects were relegated to the periphery. Departing from this statement the organic growth of medieval cities is explained. In contrast, planned cities, such as Luebeck, had a more regular, often rectangular street plan. An interesting section is on the occupational geography of the pre-modern city. Here he sees an important turning point in the period around 1100 with the rise of export industries in the cities. Phenomena like professional clustering and social zoning are discussed in this section in a very comprehensive way (pp. 76-79). The social mix within the same district of the town disappeared by the end of the middle ages. Here, the real estate market comes in as an explanation, as well as social protectionism by the urban elites. On the theoretical level he juxtaposes Sjobergs theory on the social differences be-

tween the urban center and periphery with the view of James Vance who rather states that the medieval city was controlled by craft guilds on the basis of occupational differences. Nicholas warns against both ideal types by referring to the examples of deviating cases he cited in the previous sections. Neither were there clear distinctions between center and periphery nor were the occupational districts as clearly present as Vance assumes.

After a survey of the political organization and power structures of the pre-industrial city (chapter 4), the social structures and infrastructures are dealt with (chapter 5). In this chapter, Nicholas takes up the initial question concerning the reasons for people to move to a city. A concept that fits better than the modern term of social class to encompass the pre-industrial social relationships is Robert Mousnier's concept of status (p. 119-120). However, some of the major factors of attraction according to Nicholas were of an economic nature, that is, the higher employment opportunities, the diversified labor market, and higher wages. In his description of the social organization of urban life he pays much attention to the role of occupational guilds, which played a crucial role in the socio-professional life of townsmen. In the middle of a paragraph on the guild and the urban family, the author makes a jump to family structures, the social position of women, etc. In the rest of the chapter several topics concerning the social structures of the city are dealt with without however forming one single argument. Hence there is a section on the diversity of goods and the birth of the tertiary sector and the relationship between landholding and commercial activities. Here the development of ecclesiastic and civic organizations of poor relief is sketched and the strengthening of public control of begging and controlled poor relief.

In contrast with the rather functional and analytical approach in the first chapters, chapter 6 on material culture and cultural environment is more descriptive and impressionistic. It begins with a lively description of the urban environment, starting with a reference to the waste problem of the pre-industrial city. A second concern was the noise, which, according to the author, was manifold and omnipresent. From here, he turns to a description of the built environment, the houses, streets etc. The structure of the typical town house is discussed in some detail, including the changes over time, such as increasing fire security and the tendency of division into distinct rooms. Another aspect that is discussed is the city as a spectacle, with a description of processions, joustings, and other festivals. In this section the author quotes from contemporary descriptions in order

to present the impression the spectacles made on the audience. Also in this chapter, the Central Place approach is maintained. Hence a section is devoted to the question: to what degree cultural functions of different cities can be compared.

In his concluding reflections Nicholas once again stresses the multifunctional character of the city. He gives a short survey of his main argument, starting with a sketch of the rise and development of the urban phenomenon between 1100 and 1700. In spite of the imperfections of the city, it attracted masses of immigrants for whom the city offered opportunities which made them more attractive than their former residence. Among these opportunities, employment was certainly the most important. In fact, cities rendered the life of their inhabitants as well as their surroundings more comfortable. City councils were, although not democratic in their composition, responsive to the needs of their subjects. The rise of mass industrialization changed the role and nature of the city profoundly, but still a basic knowledge of the pre-industrial city is fundamental to understanding modern urban society.

In general, the book tries to explain the functioning of the European city in the pre-industrial period in its multiple aspects and to stress its originality. One of its great merits is the broad variety of topics that are covered. It provides indeed a great deal of information, on different aspects of urban life throughout Europe during a period of six centuries. The material which he collected from a substantial bibliography is presented together with the major studies and theories concerning the individual topics. In the bibliography, particularly

the presence of a great number of titles in Dutch and German, together with a base of English and French literature is a very positive feature. This great amount of information makes it difficult, however, to fit it into one coherent argument. Instead, each chapter is subdivided in several paragraphs, which form units on their own. The link between them is not always immediate. The thematic organization of the book puts the chronological dimension into the background. The only chapter which is actually organized on a chronological basis is chapter one. Behind this choice stands Nicholas's conviction that there was no major breaking point in the development of the European city between 1100 and 1700, as for example the traditional distinction between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Instead, he sees a striking continuity during the whole of his research period (p. 191). A minor weakness is the occurrence of some mistakes concerning the titles of articles or authors in the footnotes and in the bibliography. So, on p. 206, note 105, the French historian Robert Muchembled is referred to as "Muchambled", on p. 210, note 114: the English word "network" is used instead of the Dutch "netwerk"; on p. 225: "staedtschen Literature" instead of "staedtschen Literatur." In chapter 2 (p. 38) the author refers to the influential study by Bruce M. S. Campbell, James Galloway, Derek Keene, and Margareth Murphy on the grain supply of medieval London as if Campbell were the only author (although in the footnote and in the bibliography the reference is correct). These are however only minor imperfections of this compact, yet very comprehensive survey of the European city of pre-industrial Europe, which will be a welcome tool for teachers in urban history as well as a good introduction to anyone who wants to become familiar with the discipline.

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