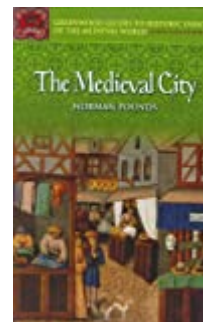


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Norman Pounds. *The Medieval City*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005.
xx + 264 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-32498-7.



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Norman Pounds is best known to many for his established work as an economic historian and historical geographer of the middle ages, but perhaps rather less familiar as an urban historian. His past books have included *An Economic History of Medieval Europe* (1974) and *An Historical Geography of Europe* (1990). His latest book on *The Medieval City* is a slight departure, therefore, though in it Pounds clearly draws on his broad knowledge of medieval Europe, and the book ranges quite widely in its geographical coverage of Western Europe and in its temporal coverage of the middle ages, from the re-emergence of urbanism in the seventh century through to its apogee in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It does a good job presenting an overview of the medieval city.

Since a number of books on the subject of medieval urbanism have appeared over the last few years it is difficult not to compare Pounds's *The Medieval City* with what they have to offer. His particular treatment of the subject in the book is arranged around key themes: the urban plan, urban way of life, church and city, city government, urban trade, and health, wealth, and welfare. All good, relevant topics, and well-written chapters. Indeed, the style of the book is suited to its main target audience of history undergraduate students. This is helped by the addition of a glossary as well as sample "primary documents," seventeen in all. His thematic approach is

shared by other recent books on the subject, such as David Nicholas's *Urban Europe 1100-1700*, John Schofield and Alan Vince's *Medieval Towns*, and my own *Urban Life in the Middle Ages 1000-1450*, rather than the more traditional chronological approach of say Adriaan Verhulst's *Rise of Cities in North-West Europe*. Interestingly, none of these works are actually cited by Pounds in *The Medieval City*. Instead, the literature he draws upon is in the main somewhat dated, much of it coming from the 1960s and 1970s. In itself this is not a problem, for there is much of great value in earlier studies of medieval urbanism, but it makes for a rather traditional book overall in terms of its treatment of the topics covered. This is especially noticeable for me in the chapters that touch geographical aspects of medieval urbanism, for instance in the use of central-place theory to examine the distribution pattern of towns and cities in eastern England, and in the distinction drawn in chapter 2 on the urban plan between the "planned town" and the "unplanned town", a distinction long known now by urban morphologists to have no real meaning. The plans of towns used to illustrate this chapter also show their age and are rather oversimplified. The later chapters derive more from history than geography, and here again they are fairly conservative treatments of, for example, city government and guilds. For an undergraduate audience this is fine, for clear explanations are given on what are for many students quite difficult and

alien concepts.

Overall, *The Medieval City* is a readable introductory book. It is a shame though that the bibliography provided will not guide the student to more recent studies of the medieval city, and it is a shame that the book as a whole does not engage much with recent scholarship.

The rather sparse footnotes used in each chapter also do little to help the more discerning undergraduate. Where the student will gain by reading this book instead rather than its recent competitors is through its useful reproduction of extracts from primary documents, for these perhaps more than anything else provide an insight into the medieval city.

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