13. Competing cities and urban networks in medieval Europa

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City branding today goes beyond merely a slogan. Cities present themselves as a brand in order to attract people, investors and companies. It is crucial for a city to distinguish itself from other cities through its architecture, social policies, public facilities or fiscal arrangements. Intercity competition is, however, something that goes back further in time: the earliest cities tried to create an attractive environment for migrants and merchants to settle in, which in turn contributed to the development of durable urban networks.

Cities and urban networks

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 nodes for flows of people, goods and information. 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 Netherlands, where trade flows from the Rhine, the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea came together. Itinerant merchants initially met each other at annual fairs that were always held
in the same order, but from the end of the 13th century, Bruges emerged as a trade metropolis where foreign merchants settled more permanently, after which Antwerp took over this role some two hundred years later.

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.

Urban prosperity and urban decay

The urbanisation process in medieval Europe appeals to the imagination because the cities that arose then still shape the landscape. For example, old city centres are popular tourist
attractions, and many city halls have their origins in medieval times. Moreover, new forms of political participation, economic cooperation and social cohesion emerged in medieval urban communities. Cities have since been the drivers of socio-political changes, economic innovation and cultural creativity. In comparison with the degree of urbanisation in today’s Europe, at the end of the Middle Ages the continent was in general still primarily an agricultural society. Around 1500, the average degree of urbanisation is estimated to have been around 10 percent – only in certain regions in Italy, on the Iberian peninsula and in the Netherlands was this percentage higher. In the province of Holland, for example, around half of the inhabitants lived in cities and towns in the 15th century, much more than in the rural eastern Netherlands.

Few European cities experienced permanent demographic growth and economic prosperity in the period between 1000 and 1500. From the second quarter of the 14th century, the growth of most cities stagnated; socio-economic inequality and political polarisation had already increased significantly in urban society. The Black Death – the plague that swept through Europe between 1346 and 1351, taking the lives of an estimated one-third to one-half of the population – was an unprecedented blow for many cities, which took them one and a half centuries to recover from. The adaptability of cities was further put to the test by the changing political and economic circumstances of the 14th and 15th centuries.

For medieval city councillors, it was not easy to respond effectively to the consequences of these external factors. There were also noticeable differences among the cities: one city was more resilient in absorbing the demographic and socio-economic shocks than the other. It is difficult to determine in retrospect what exactly made for a successful recipe for urban recovery and how the urban network was of influence. One comparison that can be made here is with the European industrial cities that fell into a state of decay in the second half of the 20th century. The attempts by politicians and government officials to give
these cities a boost were rarely successful. Even today, a standard recipe for urban renewal simply does not exist because policy and investment must be tailored to local circumstances and cities must at the same time adapt to external factors such as global economic developments or national political circumstances.

Medieval councillors had just as difficult a task in safeguarding the prosperity of the urban community (the bonum commune) in times of economic downturn or increasing competition from other cities, but recent historical research shows that they tried to strengthen the competitiveness of their cities in various ways. Competing against each other, cities in late-medieval England developed aggressive strategies to attract merchants and workers. And cities such as London, York and Norwich invested in administrative and economic institutions and public facilities in order to build up their reputations as reliable marketplaces and attractive business locations.

Another option was to seek the support of the monarch. This was what cities in the Netherlands did, such as when Bruges welcomed the emperor-to-be Charles V in 1515 with elaborate ceremonial displays. Business in Bruges had been poor for some decades already, the city having rebelled against Charles’ grandfather and experiencing much competition from Antwerp. Using tableaux vivants (living paintings), the city’s past prosperity and the acute crisis it was undergoing was brought to the new monarch’s attention in the hope that he would give the city a boost in his capacity as ruler of a global empire. The foreign merchants from the Hanseatic cities, Italy and Spain who were present at the festivities also subsidised the cost of the spectacle. Nonetheless, Charles V failed in turning the tide for Bruges.

International trade moved to Antwerp in the last decade of the 15th century after the city had received the monarch’s political support to offer traders attractive trade and business conditions. For international merchants, access to markets was essential; they moved their operations easily from one port and marketplace to the other within the urban network of the Netherlands. To maintain their position within this network, cities competed
with each other by adapting their institutions to the requirements of the merchants. The importance of good political and economic governance is illustrated by the example of two cities in Zeeland. In the 14th century, Zierikzee was a flourishing port acting as a hub for Flanders, Brabant and Holland, but in the 15th century Middelburg took over this position. The latter enjoyed political stability and economic growth in this period and attracted migrants from not only the surrounding countryside but also more distant cities and countries. In contrast, Zierikzee fell into conflict with the monarch in the second half of the 15th century, as a result of which it lost its privileges for an extended period of time; the impoverished city endured depopulation and rising vacancy rates and also suffered disastrous fires and floods. The core of the problem, however, lay in the fact that the councillors and inhabitants of Zierikzee failed to adequately react to economic and political changes.

**Institutional diversity**

Shrinking cities in the Middle Ages did not always succeed in turning the tide, but usually the consequences of this were limited to demographic and economic shifts within the urban network. Urban networks were more robust, and their resilience was based largely on the institutional diversity between cities. This allowed cities to compete with each other, and the urban network was as a whole less vulnerable to the effects of structural changes. Moreover, these networks had a polycentric character – cities benefited from being close to each other and filled various economic, social and cultural functions within the same region. Networks between cities could be of a political, economic or cultural nature without necessarily being complementary or tied to specific territorial boundaries.

Needless to say, these historical insights do not easily translate into the complex 21st-century context in which cities have increasingly become part of ‘global assemblages’. From a long-term
perspective, however, institutional diversity, functional complementarity and polycentric networks should definitely be included in an urban agenda that aims to further the interlinking of European cities.

The author

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Further reading


