




REVIEW ESSAY

Sociological approaches and the urban history of medieval England: research trends and new perspectives (2017–2022)

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In 2011, when Jelle Haemers looked back on a decade's worth of Ph.D. theses on urban centres in the medieval Low Countries, he identified three main trends in scholarship: the emphasis on individuals, rather than institutions; the increasing use of new methodologies, such as social network analysis (SNA) and prosopography; and the deployment of inter-disciplinary perspectives. Haemers' intuition proved prescient; recent doctoral contributions to the historiography of medieval English towns and cities tend, generally, to fall along similar lines. In many ways, this is natural, and a testament to the enduring legacy and successes of earlier works. But, as the following discussion will elaborate, important and divergent steps have also been made, pushing our perceptions of pre-modern urban societies in new directions. Medieval urban history remains a vibrant area for study, with Ph.D. students forming an important section of its vanguard.

The theses considered here might broadly be classified as social history. As with those that Haemers reviewed, they are concerned with the individuals who populated medieval towns, the ways in which they interacted both with each other and with institutions and the factors that influenced their decisions and beliefs. Sub-categories might be imposed to further delineate these works – more specifically they are histories of urban religion, urban subaltern groups, or urban governance and economy – but together they represent a broad social approach that shines a light on all aspects of the lived experiences of medieval urban inhabitants.

Religion and belief, or the 'social church'

The idea of a 'social church' in the Middle Ages was given forceful definition recently by Ian Forrest in his monograph *Trustworthy Men*.¹ This simple phrase breaks down fundamentally traditional disciplinary boundaries: the church as an

¹I. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men: How Inequality and Faith Made the Medieval Church* (Princeton, 2018); see also the identification of a recent historiographical trend of research on the individual and interaction with Christianity in J.H. Arnold, 'Histories and historiographies of medieval Christianity', in J.H. Arnold (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity* (Oxford, 2014), 23–39.

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institution, belief, politics, social and cultural forces and economics are not to be studied discretely but rather as interacting facets that shaped medieval lives and experiences. In urban centres, this was keenly felt: let us not forget that London alone had over one hundred parishes and several dozen religious houses, while the diocesan St Paul's Cathedral formed an integral part of both the city's landscape and the daily lives of its inhabitants. This principle has informed several recent theses in which parishes, religious guilds, monasteries and areas of ecclesiastical jurisdiction have all been considered through their social functions, concurrently drawing in elements of political, economic and religious histories.

Joe Chick's thesis on the pre-Reformation town of Reading (Berkshire) is among the widest ranging of the theses under consideration and, in many ways, shares an approach with more traditional all-encompassing urban histories.² Chick presents several important conclusions for the history of Reading between the fourteenth and early seventeenth centuries (taking a wider chronological view than the other theses discussed here), the most important of which is that he overturns the assumption that pre-Reformation Reading was mainly characterized by antagonistic relations between the town's governing guild and the immensely wealthy and powerful abbey. Through judicious and innovative deployment of SNA, Chick is able to present a more nuanced picture of urban life during the period, illuminating the activities and social networks not just of burgesses and their role in governing the town, but of more obscure groups too, demonstrating that – at least in a town like Reading – there was much interaction and overlap between the governors and the town's inhabitants. By visualizing the connections of individuals in network graphs, measuring the centrality of actors within a network and through join-count tests, Chick deploys three forms of statistical analysis.³ Chick argues that civic office-holding was motivated by a desire to gain a reputation for trustworthiness (or good *fama*) rather than being merely the product of oligarchy or the existence of a *cursum honorum*; thus, he suggests, it had a social value that extended beyond the immediate confines of urban government. The concept of oligarchy, specifically the timings of its rise (whether it was a medieval or early modern phenomenon) and the spectrum of inclusion or exclusion, has been debated by historians for decades, and Chick's study responds to Christian Liddy's warning against viewing urban political processes from a top-down perspective.⁴ Chick's reappraisal of urban oligarchy in Reading ultimately finds that exclusionary practices – characteristic of an oligarchy – rose in the early modern period, but he emphasizes that this exclusivity did not extend to the social and economic interactions of those within the oligarchy. It is clear that living within and belonging to pre-modern urban communities was more complex than traditional narratives of institutional developments allow.

In examining late medieval Bristol, Esther Lewis similarly employs SNA to reconstruct pious networks in both social and geographical terms. Adopting a

²J. Chick, 'Cloisters and clothiers: the social impact of Reading's transition from monastic lordship to self-governance, 1350–1600', University of Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 2020.

³Chick's employment of the 'join-count' method tests, in essence, the likely interaction between individuals who share personal characteristics. Chick's use of this particular method is the first application to a pre-modern town.

⁴C.D. Liddy, *Contesting the City: The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250–1530* (Oxford, 2017).

sociological understanding of ‘belonging’, Lewis confirms the multi-faceted nature of late medieval piety.⁵ Individuals left deathbed bequests to urban parishes, hospitals, monastic houses and chapels beyond their immediate proximity, demonstrating evidence of overlapping lifetime affiliations and communities. Informed by the work of her supervisor, Rob Lutton, Lewis’ thesis features discussions of heterodoxy and Lollardy.⁶ She demonstrates that there was a diversity of ideas and beliefs in medieval Bristol, but also that those beliefs did not lead to segregated communities within the geography of the late medieval city; evidently, those with differing viewpoints lived within the same parishes and operated within the same social and commercial networks. Lewis’ thesis is an important reminder to historians of the late Middle Ages that the complexity of human beliefs and relationships should not be reduced to binaries. For scholars of heresy, this thesis includes a useful appendix of bequests and information on Bristol Lollards implicated in the heresy trials of Bristol and Coventry.

Viewing late medieval religious practice from a different perspective, my own thesis sets out to establish the role played by membership of the Palmers’ Guild of Ludlow in late medieval society.⁷ Based in a relatively small market town, the Palmers had, by the late fifteenth century, developed a membership reach that far surpassed that of a traditional ‘parish fraternity’, with members drawn from across most counties in England, Wales and even a small number from Ireland and continental Europe. This extensive reach, bolstered by an excellent run of surviving archival material, encourages a new approach that views guild membership as an important vector of the institutional church, piety, community, politics and the economy.

Among the surviving records of the guild, the existence of over one thousand property deeds permits the application of network analysis to suggest the social make-up of the guild in its early centuries when membership lists rarely survive. But sociological principles are also deployed more broadly: social networks (in a qualitative sense) and socially grounded decision-making are seen as important factors in encouraging membership. Networks that influenced the decision to become a member of this national guild were both localized and regional. For example, membership of the Palmers’ Guild was integrated with the government of *other* towns, such as Worcester, Coventry, Gloucester and Bristol. In these instances, it was used to strengthen civic networks and reinforce claims to local political authority. The influence of employers, particularly in urban craft households, is evident through widespread enrolment among masters and their servants and apprentices – guild membership was a channel through which masters and servants alike worked together to safeguard a moral and reputable household. Familial networks, across the country, were another important influence upon the decision to join this particular national guild. The management of the Palmers’ Guild, in turn, created an elaborate institutional structure which sought to replicate the existing relationships

⁵E. Lewis, ‘Networks and neighbourhoods: devotional practices and attitudes towards the church in late medieval Bristol, 1400–1500’, University of Nottingham Ph.D. thesis, 2020.

⁶R. Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England: Reconstructing Piety* (Woodbridge, 2006).

⁷R. Harkes, ‘Joining a fraternity in late medieval England: the case of the Ludlow Palmers’ Guild, c. 1250–1551’, Durham University Ph.D. thesis, 2020.

of fraternity, friendship, charity and assistance that characterized the thousands of local guilds found in the parishes across medieval England and Wales.⁸

One of the main contentions of my work is that the Palmers' Guild (and, by extension, other fraternal organizations) could be used by individual and groups of members in ways that suited their particular social setting and social aims. Whether this was familial, political, for reasons of reputation or to facilitate business and land transactions, localized communities and networks of members across the country engaged with each other and the guild at Ludlow in a meaningful manner. Although the guild's spiritual aspects cannot be overlooked, its social ones were equally important to its members, and fraternities are demonstrated to have been crucial in many aspects of late medieval society.

Of all the recent theses considered here, Richard Asquith's is the only one to *explicitly* situate his study within Forrest's framework of the 'social church'.⁹ Taking one aspect of the institutional church – its jurisdiction over probate – Asquith evaluates its social impact through an examination of rarely surviving pre-Reformation executors' accounts. Although the case-studies are drawn solely from London's mercantile classes, this approach has wider implications: primarily for historians' use of testamentary evidence, as it demonstrates how deficient it might be in terms of representing the full complement of urban executors' work. Late medieval London's executors routinely went above and beyond the provisions set out in a will, often with important consequences for the urban landscape and urban society.

But the primary importance of Asquith's study lies in the framing of medieval executorship as a phenomenon that was inherently social. Throughout each chapter, in addition to detailing the often substantial outcomes of the probate process, Asquith routinely emphasizes the various social networks, interactions and transactions that underpinned executorship. He argues that many of these were a product of the urban setting, in which access to a dense web of wholesalers, retailers and religious institutions was fundamental to the successful execution of a will. It was, moreover, only in the circumstances surrounding executorship that these networks came together in this precise way. For instance, in orchestrating the funerals and other obsequies for the deceased, executors called upon social networks and credit structures that both permeated the City and extended beyond it. The fourth chapter deals explicitly with how these networks were used, by studying the channels through which charity might be distributed and the ways in which executors delegated certain aspects of their work. All the executors under examination habitually looked to servants, apprentices and business associates to carry out routine tasks, while those of Stephen Jenyns (d. 1523), merchant taylor and mayor of London, were evidently utilizing the status of the provincial prior of the Austin Friars when they delegated the distribution of money to poor scholars in Oxford to him. Executors did not work alone.

⁸The centrality of these themes in medieval guilds and their overarching importance to the individual in late medieval society have been illustrated at length in G. Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England, 1250–1550* (Oxford, 2015).

⁹R. Asquith, 'Piety and trust: testators and executors in pre-reformation London', University of London Ph.D. thesis, 2022.

In more abstract terms, social notions of trust and *fama* (reputation) are shown to have been equally important to the success of late medieval executorship. Asquith builds upon the *fides* (trust) lexicon identified by Forrest to argue that the relationship between testators and executors was constructed through recourse to the language of trust in last wills and testaments.¹⁰ This at once reflected existing social relationships and set expectations about how executors were to carry out their duties. Pushing this theme further, Asquith thoughtfully considers how the accounts kept by executors both represented and affirmed the trustworthiness which the testator beheld in them. In doing so, he dismantles pre-existing notions of the self-interested and untrustworthy executor, instead presenting an accurate and socially grounded view of urban executors.

Margins and minorities in medieval towns

Sociological approaches have also been employed to great effect in studies of particular groups, notably those we might term ‘minorities’ in late medieval London. Charlotte Berry’s study of those on the margins of the city (both physically and socially) and Joshua Ravenhill’s on immigrant (commonly termed ‘alien’ by contemporaries and historians alike) communities are a testament to how such approaches might reveal those individuals and groups normally glossed over for lack of evidence.

Berry’s thesis – which has since been developed into a monograph – critically investigates the medieval origins of a topic that features heavily in, and which is sometimes held to be unique to, early modern literature.¹¹ She focuses on the uses and characteristics of marginal spaces in London between 1370 and 1540 through a study of five extra-mural parishes.¹² Berry combines traditional historical methodologies with an approach inspired by sociology and digital humanities. Quantitative SNA is bolstered by GIS mapping, which work alongside evidence from late medieval wills and depositions from London’s Consistory Court (an ecclesiastical court that dealt with canon law violations), the use of which as a source for social history was spearheaded by Shannon McSheffrey.¹³

As with other recent theses, Berry is keen to stress that hers is not an institutional study, viewing marginal status from the centre, and instead she convincingly

¹⁰There has been a continued interest in language, its accompanying meanings and use in medieval urban centres, no doubt a product of the linguistic turn, in recent theses. For example, the widespread rhetoric of ‘common profit’ in fourteenth-century London: D. Gonzalez, ‘Common profit and civic governance in Ricardian London, c. 1375 – c. 1391’, University of Kent Ph.D. thesis, 2019. Alternatively, the use of ‘public opinion’ and language choice in fifteenth-century Paris: L. Giraudet, ‘Political communication and public opinion in the *Journal d’un bourgeois de Paris*, 1405–1449’, University of York Ph.D. thesis, 2019.

¹¹C. Berry, ‘Margins and marginality in fifteenth-century London’, University of London Ph.D. thesis, 2018; C. Berry, *The Margins of Late Medieval London, 1370–1540* (London, 2022).

¹²St Botolph Aldersgate, St Botolph Aldgate, St Botolph Bishopsgate, All Hallows London Wall, and St Katharine Cree.

¹³Shannon McSheffrey has used depositions effectively in a number of works, but particularly in S. McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, 2006); J. Bennett and S. McSheffrey, ‘Early, erotic and alien: women dressed as men in late medieval London’, *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2014), 1–25.

demonstrates how individuals living within the margins understood and managed their own positions within society through the constant negotiation of reputation and status. Marginality was both ‘a producer and product of social relations’ and therefore the physical geography, economy and society of the marginal neighbourhoods of medieval London are concurrent foci of Berry’s analysis. Yet marginality is understood not simply in terms of the physical space of the city but also in terms of how the social value assigned to particular spaces influenced the status socially ascribed to individuals. The relationship between social and spatial marginality was, as Berry states, ‘complex and symbiotic’ and sensitivity to this nuanced relationship is evident in Berry’s conclusion that neighbourhoods were the primary forum in which Londoners negotiated their lived experience. Although, as noted, this is not an institutional study, Berry’s reading against the grain of surviving sources reveals the role that ecclesiastical institutions assumed in the lives of those living in extra-mural parishes. Religious houses and hospitals were an important feature of marginal neighbourhoods, influencing the economy, exercising unexpected authority over tenants in properties outside their jurisdiction and playing a role in the social life of the neighbourhood.¹⁴

Ravenhill’s thesis is explicitly and consistently grounded in social science methodologies, most notably – like Lewis – that of ‘belonging’.¹⁵ Ravenhill’s thorough and thoughtful consideration of how medieval historians might be able to use this concept productively should be a template for other historians looking to understand belonging in the historical past. As a socially constructed category, belonging was (and is) not static: its parameters could change with heightened political or economic tension, and it required constant negotiation with many different parties, such as government, members of the local community and migrants themselves. When applying this analytical tool to the medieval city and its alien inhabitants, Ravenhill considers formal organizations, like parish fraternities or craft associations, alongside informal social networks such as, for example, neighbours. Many of his findings highlight the actions that aliens would take to shake off the inherent untrustworthiness associated with ‘transient’ workers in medieval communities and establish good *fama*, develop trade connections and therefore foster commercial success. For instance, a method unique to aliens was for a journeyman to live with a householder (master) for several years, using the proximity of a reputable householder to develop their own trustworthy reputation over the course of several years before setting up their own shop. This is markedly different from English journeymen, who would reside in their own home and work within the householder’s shop during the day.

Removing the sociological framework Ravenhill employs, the sources and approaches used – probate records and court testimonies – echo past studies of medieval London, particularly McSheffrey’s research on marriage and sex, mentioned above.¹⁶ Ravenhill uses deposition testimonies to reconstruct acceptable narratives of the place of aliens in society, thereby elucidating the customary beliefs, processes and practices of foreigners. Ravenhill’s exposition of the experiences of aliens in

¹⁴Berry, ‘Margins and Marginality’, ch. 6.

¹⁵J. Ravenhill, ‘The experience of aliens in later medieval London and the negotiation of belonging, 1400–1540’, University of York Ph.D. thesis, 2019.

¹⁶McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, passim.

London sheds light on the flexibility of leading civic bodies and their self-imposed regulations in medieval London. Not all regulations were enforced, particularly those regarding citizenship and livery membership in the second half of the fourteenth century, and some leaders of livery companies exercised the freedom to overlook civic ordinances when it suited them in regard to aliens. Individual experiences as a foreigner within London were therefore varied, and, as Ravenhill astutely points out, the capacity to negotiate inclusion depended on specific factors. Gender, wealth and age determined opportunities to negotiate belonging into formal or informal groups or networks. The differing experiences and social contacts of any 'marginal' group is similarly highlighted by Berry in her thesis on the margins of medieval London.

Institutions and individuals

The final two theses, by Dana Durkee and Adele Sykes, are less explicitly social (or at least sociologically informed) histories than those previously discussed. But both nevertheless exhibit a similar approach and take an ostensibly institutional subject – respectively, the worsted trade centred on late medieval Norwich and the wardship policies and practices for London's citizen-orphans – and view them in the context of individuals' experiences and interactions. In many ways, these are examples of a new type of institutional history – one which, given that late medieval urban spaces were defined by the existence of a densely packed population and the bonds that existed between them, is arguably more insightful.

The first half of Durkee's thesis is concerned with the commercialization of the worsted cloth industry in Norfolk generally.¹⁷ Of more relevance here, however, is the second half, which develops a prosopographical approach to evaluate the social impact of economic trends and changes on Norwich's communities of weavers. The theme of social mobility is a powerful undercurrent of Durkee's argument, as she skilfully traces both individual and inter-generational examples of weavers navigating and negotiating status through social ties and institutional parameters. Building on recent critiques of the idea of 'social mobility', Durkee's position is a nuanced one, which emphasizes the experience of individuals and socially constructed groups (for instance, through kinship or craft guilds) and the possibility of both vertical (either up or down) and lateral movement in status.

One of the main strengths is the confluence of the themes outlined above, which are drawn together in one of the most important interventions of the thesis: that the success of the worsted trade in the later Middle Ages (through the individual and collective actions of its participants) had a profound and tangible impact on the city's social, economic and civic structures. Beyond advancing our understanding of Norwich's history, Durkee provides an exemplary case-study of how individuals and institutions intertwined to make up the medieval city. One of the ways in which she demonstrates this important shift is by assessing the make-up of the city's common council and aldermanic bench. The restrictive role of London's livery companies in its governance is well known, but Durkee makes the point that Norwich's political composition was more fluid and – more importantly – that it reflected

¹⁷D. Durkee, 'Social mobility and the worsted weavers of Norwich, c. 1450–1530', Durham University Ph.D. thesis, 2017.

wider social and economic trends, embodied in the example of the cloth industry. In the 1490s, Durkee identifies a growth in participation in the common council among textile producers, which corresponded to an increase in worsted exports at around the same time. Similarly, the years around 1520 saw the climax of Norwich's worsted export economy and the highest turnover of members of the trade joining the council. Returning to the theme of oligarchy, Durkee arrives at a similar conclusion to Chick (and other recent work, such as that by Liddy) by shifting the focus down the social scale. Durkee's analysis of the relatively modest worsted weavers, and the important role they played in urban politics, offers a picture that is more aware of social reality and the divergent interests and motivations that contributed to it, and has important implications for urban historiography.

Sykes' institutional framework is not as explicitly economic as Durkee's, but rather comprises the specific civic structures present in late medieval London that dictated the city's wardship policy.¹⁸ It has long been assumed that – as the orphans of London citizens were often heirs to substantial urban fortunes – the city and its governors tightly regulated their fate. Projecting back from the sixteenth century, the existence of an official court of orphans has been inferred and studies of medieval urban wardship thus primarily look towards the civic archives of the mayor and aldermen. Sykes, on the other hand, balances an investigation of civic records with a thorough survey of testamentary evidence. By its very nature, this approach inherently tips the scales towards individual action and experience. Citizens, their individual circumstances and their social and familial networks are brought to the fore to argue that wardship was managed largely, if not exclusively, outside of the City's jurisdiction. This was an arrangement that suited all parties and contributed towards civic ideals of citizenship and common profit.

The City's role in wardship is not minimized, but re-evaluated. Sykes' thorough and considered reading of London's records results in a confident use of incidental details recorded in the City's letter books to realize significant shifts in civic policy.¹⁹ The complex mechanisms of London's civic courts and administrative and governing processes are revealed with an astute understanding of the combined (and complex) interaction between legal principles and civic practice. Instead of the existence of a formal court of orphans prior to the mid-sixteenth century, Sykes instead identifies an evolving process that allowed for the dual civic and testamentary wardship options noted above. Her investigation of civic records highlights the importance of critical 'big shifts' in this development, which she demonstrates were facilitated by the expansion of civic offices such as chamberlain and common sergeant. In many cases, it was the individual officers who encouraged important systemic change: Ralph Strode, common sergeant between 1374 and 1382, is shown to have been instrumental in overhauling the City's orphan procedures in the wake of the political turmoil of the Good Parliament of 1376. Similar shifts are identified and contextualized throughout the Middle Ages – characterized as 'experience, pain and learning' – until finally Henry VIII's break with Rome and the subsequent overhaul of ecclesiastical legal jurisdiction offered the opportunity

¹⁸A. Sykes, 'The medieval foundations of the Court of Orphans: London and wardship, c. 1250 – c. 1550', University of London Ph.D. thesis, 2021.

¹⁹For example at p. 199.

to bring wardship fully under the aegis of the City. This assessment is far more convincing than that of Charles Carlton who portrayed medieval wardship as static and unchanging. Sykes has rightly overtuned this position by demonstrating that as the City underwent profound changes, so too did its policies towards orphans.²⁰

This is a thesis that emphasizes the uniqueness of pre-modern cities within their society. London's legal customs and privileges, Sykes argues, set its wardship practices apart from other urban centres and broader feudal custom in medieval England. The role of civic government, individual officers and the citizenry at large are all shown to have both influenced and been influenced by orphan policies through a new reading of medieval sources and an impressive command of legal, political and social contexts.

Conclusion

Medieval urban historians are more frequently turning towards ideas borrowed from the social sciences as a means of integrating institutional histories with lived experience. As the surviving sources for this period were frequently generated by institutions or within an institutional framework, these new methods are pushed in creative ways though historians remain aware of the limitations of such material. History as a discipline has a long tradition of borrowing and adapting inter-disciplinary frameworks to greater or lesser degrees of success – the sensitivity with which these theses apply sociological principles make for a convincing new perspective.

The interest in the daily lives of medieval urban inhabitants, how they moved – physically and socially – throughout the urban space, and how they, individually or in groups, negotiated political and economic upheaval, offers a welcome corrective to purely institutional studies. Emphasizing the connections between individuals and the ways in which they interacted with the world around them gives a real sense of 'lived' history, but one that was simultaneously played out against the backdrop of institutions that were as much a product of their participants' actions and motivations as forces that influenced those who encountered them.

Credence is given to the importance of social discourses – concepts that were, as these studies help to demonstrate, both commonly understood and widely practised, and had important consequences. Notions such as trust, *fama*, reputation and belonging informed the ways in which individuals behaved, dictated their interactions with each other and had practical consequences for the success of these interactions. While none are completely new concepts in either medieval or urban historiography, placing them front and centre highlights their ubiquity and importance to contemporaries. But the most striking thing about the theses discussed above is the conscious attempt to overcome traditional classifications of research as 'political', 'religious' or 'social' history. All are seen as interacting facets of medieval urban life, which can rarely be separated from each other.

²⁰C. Carlton, *The Court of Orphans* (Leicester, 1974).