

Abstracts of articles

Gervase Rosser

Myth, image and social process in the English medieval town

This essay examines the nature and role of mythical histories in English medieval towns. Myths concerning the origins and special destinies of particular cities were widespread and long-lasting. For contemporaries they acquired meaning through their interaction with changing historical circumstances. Evidence for their circulation in both elite and popular domains is reviewed. Their significance was not unambiguous; they were, rather, contested territory, a means through which townspeople articulated their particular views about the nature and purpose of urban society. Their effect, therefore, could be to assist both in the formation and in the transformation of that society. Issue is taken with the argument that the early modern period saw a weakening of the potential force of such myths.

Jon Stobart

An eighteenth-century urban revolution? Urban growth in north-west England, 1664–1801

The briefest inspection of the English urban hierarchy during the long eighteenth century reveals this as a period of immense change. However, regional analysis of the temporal and spatial patterns of these pre-census developments relies on using a variety of non-demographic sources to produce a series of urban demographic ‘snap-shots’ of the urban population. Employing this ‘demographic photography’ in early modern north-west England allows detailed investigation of the dynamics of the entire urban system. This reveals the deep roots of urban development in the region and points to an eighteenth-century urban revolution. Towns grew faster than the overall population, but this growth was unevenly distributed; both large and small towns exhibited strong and weak growth, making changes in the urban hierarchy inevitable and far-reaching. The most notable trend was the changing geography of the system: Cheshire

towns grew far less rapidly than their increasingly industrial neighbours in Lancashire and the urban locus underwent a definite shift northwards. The fact that the urban patterns of growth appear to have preceded the period of maximum industrial growth by some forty to fifty years forces us to rethink the relationship between industrial and urban development.

Andrew Brown-May

A charitable indulgence: street stalls and the transformation of public space in Melbourne, c. 1850–1920

The automobile is often misconstrued as being exclusively responsible for the decline of traditional street culture. This paper argues that the marginalisation of street vendors may also be related to developing definitions of the street as the locus of respectability, unobstructed circulation, nationalism and civic pride. Street entrepreneurs of the 1850s became urban nuisances by the 1900s, associated more with obstruction and under-servedness as with convenience and enterprise. Licensing records of bootblacks and coffee-stall keepers as objects of municipal benevolence reveal their economic and social roles in the micro-geography of the city. While nostalgia can distort the realities of historical and contemporary public spaces, the street evacuated of social density and diversity is one of the great losses of modern urban life.

Christopher R. Friedrichs

German cities in the late early modern era: some problems and prospects

Sources of information abound for the study of German urban demography in the 'late' early modern era – the period from about 1600 to 1800. Yet we are still a long way from a comprehensive grasp of urban population trends. Frequently-cited figures for the total population of German cities are often based on the uncritical replication of casual estimates. Intensive case studies which exploit the full range of available sources are more reliable, yet only the smallest towns can be subjected to the process of 'total reconstitution'. A true understanding of German urban demography in the early modern era may come less from the endless accumulation of data than from a thoughtful comparison of findings from different cities.