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# Review of periodical articles

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## Pre-1500

The year 2024 was a year of citizenship. In more than 80 countries around the world, enfranchised individuals went to cast their votes to elect new governments. The outcomes of those elections will be old news by the time this review is published, but they will continue to affect geopolitics for years to come, for better or worse. Our epoch is frequently lambasted as a unique time of political crisis, among other things because of growing anti-democratic and anti-emancipatory sentiments, coupled with the rise of populism (a paradox?). But how much of a rift are we experiencing, really? Thomas Bisson once wrote, in a debate about power in Europe around the year 1100, that 'one does not safely bet against continuity in history', but he immediately went on to argue that the period under consideration was, in fact, a time of 'disruption' and 'revolution', and he would later term it a 'crisis'.[1] Last year's reassessment of twelfth-century monastic writings on the ideal civic culture by Peter Jones reveals an ideological side of that crisis around 1100. The twelfth century saw a transition in the imagination of paradise from a recreative, walled garden to a heavenly city where politics were more egalitarian, inclusive and representative. While it would be anachronistic to apply the term democracy to urban society at this time, Jones argues it is equally wrong to ignore the ideas about representative politics in contemporary texts. Twelfth-century monks imagined a society where power was redistributed, and a greater diversity of citizens had agency. The democratizing ideal of social transformation was not limited to texts or the imagination of monks, it also found concretization in concepts like the common good or the empowering of the collective (Peter Jones, 'Is paradise a democracy? The heavenly city as political paradigm, c. 1145–55', *Past & Present*, 263 (2024), 47–80).

Perhaps it will be up to the historians of the thirtieth or thirty-first century to decide how politically disruptive our own times are. In the meantime, there is the welcome cultural relativism (and perhaps consolation) of history. One takeaway from

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[1] T. Bisson, 'The "feudal revolution"', *Past & Present*, 142 (1994), 6–42, at 9; cf. Thomas Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European* Government (Princeton and Woodstock, 2009).

last year's scholarship is a reminder that our present-day conception of citizenship, as pertaining to the level of nation-states, is not the only or natural way of doing things. Our distant ancestors inhabiting the urban sphere, too, had to contend with issues stemming directly from (dis)enfranchisement in their daily lives in local towns. The most direct discussion of this topic comes in two articles by Christian Liddy. In one of these, Liddy sets out to interpret a curious instance of popular protest in the English city of Norwich in 1532; a food riot that primarily involved women. To make sense of it, he argues, historians need to rethink the male-dominated model of politics that still abounds in the scholarship. Liddy proposes to treat citizenship not as a legal status so much as a social practice that people performed in their daily lives through personal encounters. Women were 'conduits of citizenship' in this sense. Firstly, it was in the home – where women held authority – that townspeople learned how to be citizens. Secondly, women played a key role in political uprisings such as that of 1532 by traversing the spatial divide between public and private spheres of urban living. These movements inform a new conception of the city as 'a collection of houses and households'. The food riot was *about* the household, the place for feeding families and the single political space where women were allowed to gather (Christian Liddy, 'The household, the citizen and the city: towards a social history of urban politics in the late Middle Ages', *Social History*, 49 (2024), 261–93). Liddy's approach ties in with an engaging article by Eliza Hartrich on the concept of 'popular control' – the capacity of 'the people' to impose limits on power and institutions. Hartrich focuses on the act of seeing and hearing others manage 'common' resources (lands, seals, treasuries) in the fifteenth-century town of Lynn (now King's Lynn), through audits and collectively witnessing the work of office-holders by non-office-holders. Hartrich agrees with Liddy and others that there were two opposing contemporary visions of urban politics, essentially one top-down and the other bottom-up, but she adds that these were rather about the question of which aspects of government should be subject to 'popular control' (through active witnessing) and which required 'discrete deliberation' (through passive election). There was an observable shift over the course of the fifteenth century: while more and more people gained access to platforms of public debate, many issues were moved from the realm of popular scrutiny to that of closed deliberation (Eliza Hartrich, 'The boundaries of popular control in late medieval English towns', *Journal of Social History*, 58 (2024), 27–51).

The second study by Liddy is one of several that further complicate the picture of citizenship by exploring the relationship between lordship and civic identity in urban politics. Liddy's article challenges scholarship that emphasizes the importance of 'self-governing' towns over those that fell under a seigneurial lordship. Focusing on the Staffordshire towns of Walsall and Tamworth, he demonstrates that lordship and urbaneness were inextricably linked in civic identity. Townspeople often owed their enfranchisement to local lords and urban political discourse, and their political relations were rooted in relations of land tenure. At the same time, townspeople used land and tenurial relations to formulate political claims against the king, against their lords and against other towns. The great strength of this article is that it offers proof that the seigneurial and the urban were far from mutually exclusive dimensions of power and identity in late medieval England; that the two could in fact feed off each other, to the benefit of local elites and perhaps even of ordinary tenants (Christian Liddy, 'The making

of towns, the making of polities: towns and lords in late medieval Europe', *Past & Present*, 264 (2024), 3–47).

The other end of the spectrum is pursued by Lorenzo Caravaggi in an article on Bologna and Perugia between 1276 and 1322. Caravaggi explores how rural nobles who faced criminal charges before urban courts used chivalric rhetoric and references to their magnate status in their favour, with varying levels of success. He examines cases of lords charged with homicide, robbery and assault. Despite the seeming incompatibility of chivalric values with the norms and values of the *popolo* regimes of Bologna and Perugia, Caravaggi shows that lords used such values as part of a judicial performance to negotiate identity and power with the civic elites of the lawcourts. The nobleman Ugolino da Scopeto, for example, who was accused of the ignoble crime of killing for hire in 1288, argued that his noble identity guaranteed that his behaviour had been honourable. This argument was accepted as valid by the urban court and saved the honour of his family, but did not prevent the court from finding Ugolino guilty and executing him (Lorenzo Caravaggi, 'Noble violence and civic justice: rural lords under trial in the Italian city communes, 1276–1322', *Journal of Medieval History*, 50 (2024), 47–68). Another article on the relationship between seigneurialism and urbanism relates to the case of Augsburg. Dominique Adrian shows that the urban elites of this free imperial city had a far weaker common culture than generally assumed. The urban elites of Augsburg revealed a strong desire to distinguish their family from others, rather than to assimilate with some kind of common upper-class identity. As in Perugia and Bologna, in Augsburg a certain Peter Egen/von Aragon, presented his family first and foremost as one of landlords, stressing the fiefs and seigneurial rights they owned (Dominique Adrian, 'Un monument à soi-même: les élites urbaines et leurs écrits mémoriels à Augsbourg (1400–1520)', *Revue historique*, 710 (2024), 201–36).

Last year also saw the publication of several articles about the *disenfranchised* in pre-1500 urban societies. One notable example is a study by Angela Zhang on the precarious position of enslaved women in the city of Florence. This article forms part of a special issue of *Speculum* on 'race thinking'. Zhang explicitly angles her article against earlier scholarly views on race, specifically a seminal article by Iris Origo published in *Speculum* in 1955 (titled 'The domestic enemy'). Zhang's aim is not to challenge Origo's work, but 'to contextualize the idea of "domestic enemies" into a more humane and critical treatment of enslavement…and to draw attention to the racialized language of the practice'. Through close readings of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sources, most notably the *Registro degli schiavi* (Register of slaves) of 1366–97, she reconstructs the vocabulary and rhetoric that Florentines employed with regard to the enslaved and their physical characteristics. Zhang convincingly argues that Florentines used skin colour to rank people – not just the enslaved, but also the potential marriage partners of their children. The darker the skin, the lower a person's rank (Angela Zhang, 'Rethinking "domestic enemies": slavery and race formation in late medieval Florence', *Speculum*, 99 (2024), 409–31). As Zhang and the other authors in the special issue seek to refocus scholarly attention towards the oft-erased lived experiences of enslaved people, so the *Medieval History Journal* dedicated a special issue last year to the question of Jewish co-habitation with Christians and Muslims in European and Eastern towns. Connected to the issue of citizenship, the contributions focus on the themes of inclusion, exclusion and the now well-established concept of 'belonging' to the urban community. The authors dive into the topic of religious status and civic identity by focusing on the different ways in which Jews experienced belonging in medieval cities. More precisely, they seek to

discuss aspects both of the ways Jews belonged in society and of processes that made them outsiders. The contributions to the special issue focus amongst other things on 'lived citizenship' or the practices and experiences through which, in different circumstances, citizenship became visible, which shows immense diversity. Other contributions further explore how Jews could take part in such acts – from oath swearing to festive ceremonies – and to what extent these acts granted them 'belonging' in urban settings. The special issue addresses the paradox in which Jewish families lived and worked in the same place for hundreds of years, perfectly integrated and taking part in urban society as though they fully belonged in it, all the while being viewed as outsiders by their Christian or Muslim neighbours (Special Issue: Belonging: Jews, Christians, and Civic Identity in Medieval Europe, *Medieval History Journal*, 27 (2024)).

Closely connected to this theme of belonging is an article by Rachael Harkes on a peculiar practice in English guilds. Guilds provided social security, but also belonging, including in the afterlife through masses and prayers. Harkes focuses on the understudied phenomenon in larger guilds in England of enrolling men and women after their deaths. This practice emphasizes the religious role of guilds. Often, it was the relatives of the dead who decided on such post-mortem memberships, but the guilds' leadership also took initiative. Commemorating the dead was a personal and communal responsibility (Rachael Harkes, 'Remembering the dead: postmortem guild membership in late medieval England', *Journal of British Studies*, 63 (2024), 323–48).

On the subject of inclusion, it is worth mentioning that the year 2024 saw a marked rise in the number of high-quality articles on non-European towns. Such studies have long existed, of course, but up until now they seldom appeared in mainstream journals of urban history. A study by Carlo Virgilio, for example, widens the geographical frame to include the eastern Mediterranean. Virgilio's research examines the long-term connections between Florence and Constantinople, notably attempts over the centuries by Florence to establish a colony in the city on the Bosporus. The article sketches the political and commercial interaction between the two cities from the Fourth Crusade in 1204 until the middle of the fifteenth century. Virgilio describes the desire of Florence to establish a sustainable trade connection with Constantinople as an impossible love. As a minor military power and new player in the Mediterranean, Florence could not compete with Venice and Genoa. Only when the Ottoman ruler Mehmet II granted the Florentine merchants permission to establish a colony in Constantinople in 1439 did the prospects of the relationship between the two cities change. The colony allowed Florence further commercial expansion in the Levant (Carlo Virgilio, 'Florence, Byzantium and the Florentine colony in Constantinople: an impossible love?', *Journal of Medieval History*, 50 (2024), 539–62). Venturing much further east, Yuanyue Zong examines how local officials in the Chinese city of Nanjing used greenspace to extend their control over townspeople in the flourishing city-centred culture of the Song dynasty (960–1279). During the Song dynasty, the greenspace of Nanjing, previously located in royal and private gardens, became accessible to everyone in the city, and people of different social positions could enjoy it simultaneously. In Confucian thought, gardens were associated with the relations between rulers and their people, a marker of the ruler's moral worth. Central in the use of 'nature' as a political tool, in Nanjing as elsewhere, was the Confucian concept of moral pleasure. The urban officials of Song Nanjing created various new garden projects with associated buildings and rituals. In doing so, they were casting themselves as encouraging the enhancement of visitors' knowledge

and morality, thus projecting an image of beneficial governance to the townspeople while simultaneously presenting themselves as loyal to the emperors in their emulation of imperial court culture (Yuanyue Zong, '"Share the pleasures with the public": evolution of urban landscapes in Nanjing in Song dynasty China (976–1279)', *Cultural and Social History*, 21 (2024), 1–22). The impact of ruling elites on urban society resurfaces as a theme in a study by Geetika Gupta on the regions of Rajasthan and Gujarat in Western India. Focusing on the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, Gupta demonstrates how urban development was spurred on by elite town dwellers belonging to the three uppermost castes (Brahmin priests, Khsatriya warriors and Vaishya traders and landlords). The activities of town-based merchants, in particular, were a catalyst not only in the proliferation of urban centres of exchange and the consolidation of inter-regional trade networks, but also in the commercialization of the agrarian economy (Geetika Gupta, 'Markets, merchants, and the state in early medieval Western India', *Journal of Urban History*, 50 (2024), 829–38). A more global-historical approach comes from an interesting article on the international Tunisian wine trade around 1300. Joel Pattison takes a comparative approach to this commercial activity, which centred on the Hafsid-ruled Islamic city of Tunis but featured Italian Christian traders prominently. As Muslims were forbidden from consuming alcohol, historians have long considered this Mediterranean exchange as a potential source of cross-cultural tension. However, Pattison argues provocatively that the pursuit of profit was a mutually intelligible driver that facilitated a pragmatic attitude regardless of religious bans. That said, the Tunisian customs officials occasionally policed the wine trade in a way that was unpredictable to their Italian Christian interlocutors, who failed to grasp that the Hafsid regime's seemingly erratic confiscations of wine were not about money but morality; rather than profits, provisioning public propriety (and thence power) was key (Joel S. Pattison, 'Wine, taxation, and the state in Ḥafṣid Tunis: ethical consumption and public finance in a medieval Muslim city', *Speculum*, 99 (2024), 805–25).

Despite these promising new inclusions, pre-1500 urban historiography in high-impact mainstream journals maintains a strong focus on English towns. In addition to the article of Harkes on English guilds, Hartrich on popular control in Lynn and two articles by Liddy (Walsall and Tamworth, Norwich), Andrew Brown wrote no fewer than three on the borough and priory of Durham. Although Brown's primary focus in these articles is on the priory of Durham and its monks, the themes of social security, multiple allegiances and institutional memory all touch upon important elements of urban society in the English borough. The evidence of more than 260 corrodies from two hospitals and two almshouses in and around Durham between 1400 and 1520 reveals how both men and women of all ages sought a guarantee against the hazards of society. Corrodies were allowances of food, clothing and sometimes shelter that religious institutions granted to the poor and infirm. In absence of a formal system of poor relief, people looked for protection through such means. Corrodies were, however, more than poor relief: they established a sense of belonging, comparable to joining a guild or fraternity (Andrew Brown, 'Social security in late medieval England: corrodies in the hospitals and almshouses of Durham Priory', *Historical Research*, 97 (2024), 199–217). Brown's article on institutional memory explores the way in which the monks of the priory in Durham used their archival records in legal conflicts with people from the borough (amongst others). They used their own documents to declare any contradictory documentation as 'entirely most falsely forged'. Later on, they compiled these documents in carefully

constructed *memoranda*, constructing an institutional memory in which events and processes were cherry-picked to enforce the desired narrative (Andrew Brown, 'Institutional memory and legal conflict in the Old Borough of Durham, 1300–1450', *Continuity and Change*, 38 (2023), 255–81). The third and final article by Brown, on the officials of the bishop swearing an oath of fidelity to the monks of Durham Priory, is more explicitly focused on the religious communities of Durham and less connected to urban society. Yet Brown shows that the phenomenon of swearing fidelity to two different lieges played an important role in regulating conflicts between lords and providing social stability in England, including in urban contexts (Andrew Brown, 'Oaths of fidelity: loyalty and officeholding in late medieval Durham', *History*, 109 (2024), 34–58). With his reassessment of the Sunday Law for London from 1444, Justin Kirkland adds yet another article on the English urban sphere to the frame. The Sunday Law of 1444 is well known, but its specific context has hardly been studied. This law prohibited the sale of diverse goods in London on Sundays. It was a peculiar document since the prescriptions were stricter than those of canon law. By reconstructing the context of urban society in London, Kirkland uses the Sunday Law of 1444 to show that strict Sabbatarianism – usually linked to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – was already alive in the middle of the fifteenth century (Justin S. Kirkland, 'The 1444 Sunday Law of London', *Historical Research*, 97 (2024), 295–306).

No doubt fuelled by the recent political course of the United Kingdom, urban society in pre-1500 England is often viewed as distinct from that on the European continent. Exceptionalism is, of course, claimed by many historians for the specific regions they study. After all, once one takes a deep dive into the details and peculiarities of a region or a city, it is natural to incline towards a vision of distinctiveness and uniqueness. Another such region traditionally bestowed with exceptionalism in medieval urban historiography is the Low Countries. Both the early timing and the rate of urbanization of Netherlandish principalities, such as the county of Flanders, are seen as acting like a particle accelerator for various societal processes. In a fascinating study, Janna Coomans and Léa Hermenault claim that the cities of the Low Countries were particularly precise in documenting expenses for public works. Taking Ghent as a case-study, Coomans and Hermenault show the preoccupation of urban authorities with organizing public space to avoid various risks such as accidents, floods and diseases. Facilitating routine movement through the city appears to have been key. Urban authorities did so by developing structural strategies for 'nodes' in the city where a lot of movement came together because of important public spaces, the crossing of main roads and so on. The authors refer to these policies as 'nodal spatial strategies'. The article connects with the branch of historical disaster studies that moves away from an event-based focus and looks at general institutions and strategies in determining the impact of hazards (Janna Coomans and Léa Hermenault, 'Public works, spatial strategies and mobility in late medieval Ghent', *Journal of Urban History*, 50 (2024), 1018–45). As always, it remains to be seen whether the Flemish towns were exceptional in this respect. Indeed, Gabriel Byng wrote an article arguing that the timing of urbanization was a common factor across European towns in determining long-term political trajectories, specifically as regards church maintenance. Byng distinguishes between two models, which he calls the 'London model' and the 'Vienna model'. The London model represents towns that (like Ghent) saw urbanization and the establishment of parish churches before the reforms of Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–85); reforms that

compelled secular powers to hand their foundations to clergy. Towns like these continued to be marked over the centuries by an abundance of parish churches, the control and maintenance of which rested with local officers. In the Vienna model, by contrast, parishes were not instituted until after the Gregorian reforms. In such towns, increasingly powerful urban councils wrested control away from the clergy over time. This not only correlated with more centralized control over church maintenance by the mayor and aldermen; it also led to centralization around a single or a small number of parish churches (G. Byng, 'The architecture of politics and the politics of architecture: a comparative approach to parish church building and civic government in late-medieval Europe', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 66 (2024), 392–416).

Another contribution to the bird's-eye view on periods of crisis in the Low Countries comes from an article by Stef Espeel on price integration in Flanders. Espeel demonstrates that the grain markets in the big Flemish towns had already attained a high level of price integration at the beginning of the fourteenth century which was further intensified during that century. This intensification was a result of the subsequent price shocks the grain market endured in the period between 1340 and 1370 (Stef Espeel, 'Driven by crises: price integration on the grain market in late medieval Flanders', *Economic History Review*, 77 (2024), 849–72). Taking more of a frog's-eye approach to the question of crisis in the urban Low Countries, Julie Singer comes with a stunningly sophisticated study about the 'soundscape of urban contagion' during the Black Death. Focusing on the town of Tournai, Singer explores how the blind Benedictine monk (later abbot) Gilles li Muisis wrote about the spreading plague through 'audiation', that is the mental recollection of sounds based on memory or description. She carefully dissects the dynamics of Li Muisis' audiation, which oscillated between jarring noise and unsettling quiet but also changed through subsequent phases of the Black Death. Adding to the strength of Singer's analysis is her foregrounding of elegant entanglements: here was a blind abbot, who dictated his text based on what he had heard, to be written down by someone else. Thus, the chronicle 'bears the written trace of a physical voice, the transcription of a series of vocal utterances' – this is simply excellent, and a properly innovative contribution to scholarly understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of urban health crises (Julie Singer, 'Hearing an urban plague soundscape: Gilles li Muisis in Tournai, 1349–50', *Speculum*, 99 (2024), 1225–46).

In sum, 2024 brought a good measure of good old-fashioned scholarship on the urban sphere in the pre-1500 period. The prominent position of citizenship, (dis) enfranchisement and belonging reflects the concern of scholars with important themes in our rapidly changing society today. These themes will undoubtedly continue to fascinate in the years to come. Additionally, we see the increase of some refreshing perspectives on urban life and society. The focus on the sensory dimension of the urban environment through sounds and movements brings us closer to the lived realities of the city dwellers. Coupled with the widening geographical scope beyond European cities, this development promises to foster new and innovative points of view on urban society.