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Review Essay: THE LIVELY AND THE DEAD IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN TOWNS

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STEVEN BASSETT, ed., Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying
and the Dead, 100-1600. Leicester University Press, 1992, x, 258 pp.,
illustrations, $69.00.

BARBARA A. HANAWALT and KATHRYN L. REYERS ON, eds., City and
Spectacle in Medieval Europe. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 1994, xx, 331 pp.

The papers delivered at scholarly conferences and published more or less
rapidly in the aftermath are a flourishing literary genre and perhaps the most
characteristic feature of the contemporary academic landscape. Themefocused
gatherings allow a dozen to a score of scholars to distill the fruits
of long and complex labor, which reworked and footnoted are then served up
together for the wider reading audience to pick and choose according to taste.
The evident advantage is summed up in the term interdisciplinary: one gets
a sampling of work being done from different perspectives in related fields.
The difficulty (from the point of view of a reviewer, at any rate) lies not only
in the necessarily uneven quality of broths (and puddings and roasts) prepared
by different cooks but in the nature of the posited relationship. Is there indeed
a coherent theme? Or, to try another figure of speech, is there a maypole
around which to dance?

On the face of it two more dissimilar angles of vision than urban spectacles
and urban responses to death-the quick and the dead- could hardly be
imagined. The heavy reliance on archaeology in the one case and its absence
in the other underlines a primary divergence in the evidential base. Half of
the fourteen papers in Death in Towns are archaeological. The most outstanding
of these, Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle's study of burial in Winchester from the
Iron Age to recent times, translates with admirable clarity and precision
complex archaeological data into usable historical synthesis. With its seven
tables, eight maps and line drawings, and eight crisp photographs, it offers
the nonspecialist reader a succinct introduction to archaeological methodology
and perspective. Analysis of more than 3,500 graves, consistently excavated
on a dozen sites, stands behind her conclusion that the founding of the
"Old Minster" (circa 675) was the watershed between the earlier variety in
burial location and funerary practice and the "burial monopoly" centered on
the intra-muros cathedral that will characterize the medieval town. She (and
the other authors) has been well served by the editors, who deserve praise for
the high quality of the layout and illustrations.

Julia Barrow's useful survey, "Urban Cemetery Location in the High
Middle Ages," shows how high medieval urban growth breached (or redefined)
the burial monopoly as new churches, notably those associated with
new markets, provided graveyards that became stable features of the town's
topography. In contrast, the burial grounds of socially excluded groups (i.e.,
the Jews) proved ephemeral. Roberta Gilchrist offers a pioneering look at
another marginal group, lepers, using evidence from recent excavations in
London, Chichester, and other English towns: "Christian Bodies and Souls:
The Archaeology of Life and Death in Later Medieval Hospitals." Other
archaeological papers hark back to the distant past, charting the shifting
relations between town and countryside, the living and the dead in Roman
and early medieval times. Widest ranging is Simon Esmonde Cleary's "Town

and Country in Roman Britain?" which is a useful general discussion of burial customs from the Iron Age through the three and a half centuries of Roman rule. The question mark stresses the author's surprise in concluding that from the standpoint of funerary practice, town and country were indistinguishable. Theya Molleson's study of Poundbury Camp, an important recent excavation (more than 1,400 late Roman graves with the remains of 1,200 individuals identified) came to a similar conclusion via the analysis of skeletal remains. She musters evidence from the new sciences of paleodemography and bone pathology to argue that the people in this extramural cemetery of the town of Dumovaria displayed the hallmarks of a rural population, doing agricultural rather than urban types of work.

Alan Morton leaps us three centuries forward to the eighth century, when a new trading and crafts community was created at Hamwic (Southampton). Burial seems to have been scattered haphazardly over a number of sites and many graves so manhandled by subsequent digging that "It is tempting to argue that the urban corpse was, figuratively as well as actually, a piece of rubbish." But that was before the churchyard burial model took hold in Hanwic. Taken together, the archaeological papers support the view that the triumph of Christian burial between the later seventh and the ninth centuries was also a fundamental watershed in urban self-definition. Hitherto, a variety of burial practices whose salient features often distinguished elite or nonelite status but not rural or urban identity. Henceforth, the durable association of burial with religious authority.

The prosperous and literate late Middle Ages produced a variety of new sources that other papers draw on. Vanessa Harding uses registered wills and church wardens' accounts from the late fourteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries to study "Burial Choice and Burial Location in Later Medieval London." Robert Dinn discovered a trove of 1,304 wills from Bury St Edmunds-a complete sample since the sacrist of the Abbey held exclusive testamentary rights. Like Dinn, Clare Gittings ("Urban Funerals in Late Medieval and Reformation England") is primarily interested in funerals, using wills, probate accounts filed by executors with the courts, and diaries from a number of locations. Malcolm Norris, in "Late Medieval Monumental Brasses: An Urban Funerary Industry and Its Representation of Death," writes an excellent paper solidly based on both English and European materials, disclosing a flourishing international luxury industry, with workshops in Germany, Flanders, France, and England. He shows that the iconography-with the aid of compelling photographs-stresses death's "indiscriminate jurisdiction as the terminator of all things."

Taken together, the late medieval articles reflect the array of death options open to the richer town dwellers and the greater wealth and complexity of town life. The new religious orders competed with the parishes for burial market share while the socioreligious gilds offered special services such as candlelit processions with mourners in livery, funeral feasts, requiem masses, obits and pittances (special doles of food and drink to monks and friars in return for prayers). Socioeconomic nuances are noted: trentals-a cycle of masses celebrated thirty days after burial-was a fairly cheap form of commemoration popular in Bury St Edmunds; those with first-class pretensions could purchase extravagant heraldic funerals. Status display thus emerges as the broadest and most durable feature of funerary behavior. The expensive aesthetics of the monumental brasses subtly undercut their explicit

themes of humility in the face of mortality and provide the historian with yet another marker for the rise of the self-confident, money-wise trading and manufacturing elites who had captured control of the towns from the lords and the clerics by the later Middle Ages.

Love of ceremony, hunger for status assertion, urban elites vying with kings, lay and ecclesiastical lords for symbolic and real power-such common themes offer a bridge to the dozen articles collected in City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe. The focus here is on fully developed later medieval towns, mostly in England, France, and the low countries, although two papers are devoted to Spain and one to Italy.

Brigette Bedos-Rezak's article, "Civic Liturgies and Urban Records in Northern France, 1100-1400," ably sets the stage by showing the ritual context from which written urban records developed: "The medieval urban identity may be said to be largely a matter of symbolic practices, many of which related to writing." By the twelfth century, the great moment for the spread of charters ("a textual object in which the text itself was both enshrined and a shrine for the performance of a liturgy of urban ceremonials"), the spectacle of writing was reinforced by an iconic personification of urban identity in the seal. Such an identity declares effective and symbolic independence from the lords who have recognized urban rights. In "Icons, Altarpieces and Civic Ritual in Sienna Cathedral, 1100-1530," Bram Kempers showed how the merchant and banking elite of Siena between 1250 and 1350 overcame the power of bishop, canons, and feudal nobles by seizing control of the iconography of the Virgin Mary in the cathedral and incorporating her into civic rituals. It will come as no surprise to learn, however, that royalty did ritual and ceremony with unmatched panache. Elizabeth A. R. Brown and Nancy Freeman Regalado detail the eight-day grantfeste with which Philip IV the Fair celebrated the knighthood of his sons at Pentecost, 1313, thanks to two eyewitness sources that they discovered. Besides the processions and numerous banquets given by the king and great lords, the town bourgeois made many contributions, including more than two dozen tableaux and entertainments in the street. The fun, as the other authors in this volume make clear, was just beginning and had distinctly political overtones.

Most of the spectacles and ceremonies treated in this volume date between the late fourteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries. Flanders draws the attention of James M. Murray ("The Liturgy of the Count's Advent in Bruges, from Galbert to Van Eyck") and of David Nicholas ("In the Pit of the Burgundian State Theatre: Urban Traditions and Princely Ambitions in Ghent, 1360-1420"). Gerard Nijsten treats the less familiar Duchy ofGuelders, just to the east. Murray wants to show that "The hard cord of realpolitick ... a political bargain being struck between two eager, even desperate parties" lies behind Duke Philip's adventus into Druges in 1384. Insecure in his new power, with Ghent leading a revolt against him, Philip acknowledges Bruges traditions to gain the town's support; the Brugeois play up to him to confirm their liberties and secure forgiveness for their role in the rebellion. In Guelders, Nifsten sees the Duke, originally aloof and enjoying his tournaments among nobles in his country castles, forging more and more ceremonial links with the towns in the fifteenth century because a change of dynasty has made power less secure. Ghent was quite a different story, Nicholas argues: its citizens and the Burgundian dukes usually disliked one another, and the burghers preferred to pocket as much of the ceremonial budget as they could.

Off on the frontiers of Christendom in Jaen, however, the parvenu Constable of Castille organized mock combats involving 200 of his men playing at Moors versus Christians "as orchestrated manifestations of power," aimed more at reassuring the locals and braving his real enemies in the royal court than at intimidating the Moslems of Granada. Teofilo F. Ruiz insists, against previous opinion, that such spectacles did not arise from popular culture; they were "battering rams in the internecine war of the elite" meant to reinforce power and deflect resistance.

This theme is a major text or subtext throughout the volume. Sheila Lindenbaum's discussion of the London Midsummer Watch begins by attacking the view that civic ceremonies democratically "promote cohesion within the community." Nonsense! The watch was an outgrowth of the system of surveillance through which the oligarchy controlled the city: "Like all ceremony, the watch was ritualized violence." Looking at religious guilds in a number of smaller English towns in the fifteenth century, Benjamin R. McRee argues that "Much urban ceremony produced not ... wholeness but separation, not unity but division ... assaults, murders, and, on some occasions, full-scale riots." The guilds, as creators or the pageants and ceremonies, sought to reinforce their own identities and agendas, leading to bitter disputes over status, precedence, and message, thus promoting faction, division, and unrest.

Where royalty was involved, however, the stakes were different, and the ritual and ceremony was designed to display at least a facade of unity. Lorraine Attreed examines "The Politics of Welcome" in four fifteenth-century English towns, emphasizing that the complex pageantry and considerable expense were seen as useful, indeed indispensable, investments in an ongoing reciprocal relationship. When Henry VII first came to York, the city's pageantry had to distract attention from the town's previous loyalty to his rival Richard III and later from the taint of rebellion. The York pageant masters rose to the occasion, making such flattering use of the rose as a symbolic centerpiece to stress Henry's marriage to Elizabeth of York that royal propaganda took up this emblem and developed it into the symbol of Tudor legitimacy. Lawrence M. Bryant's "Configurations of the Community in Late Medieval Spectacles: Paris and London During the Dual Monarchy" perhaps shows the ambiguities in these relationship at their most complex and subtle. The Lancasterian King Henry Vi's solemn entry into Paris in 1431 (in the heat of Joan of Arc's challenge to his legitimacy) was designed to confirm the French capital's claims to autonomy and to flatter Parlement as the legal and necessary link between king and community. Thus, the political point was made that royal government could continue in the (habitual) absence of the actual king. In London, however, it was the necessary presence of the king and the city's accessory role as the royal chamber that was symbolically stressed. In France, allegorical spectacle was an instrument for establishing bon accord between ruler and autonomous towns; in London it was the personal and symbolic ties between king and the urban elite that was translated into symbol.

Have we found some common focus to all this scholarly attention? Archaeology dominates the earlier centuries in Death in Towns (it is usefully read in conjunction with Patrick Ottawey's excellent Archaeology in British Towns [Routeledge, 1992) to disappear in the latter. Despite some halfhearted glances beyond the channel, this book deals mostly with England. City and

Spectacle has wider range and a sharper focus. The sense it conveys of a complex urban personality emerging in the later Middle Ages, defined by symbols and spectacles controlled by vigorous and self-contained oligarchies, is convincing and displays the power of the cultural-history paradigm and methodology.

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