

Spheres of Medieval Life

Medieval Towns

On approaching a larger German town in the later Middle Ages the first a traveller might see would be the sight similar to this picture of Nuremberg*: The German word 'Stadt' for an urban settlement was only used

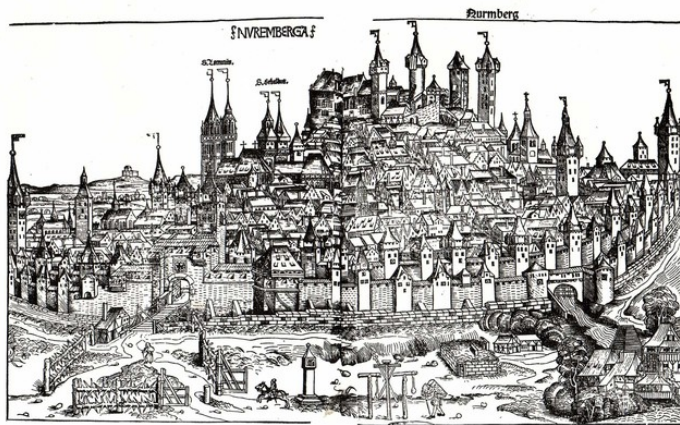


Image 1: From Schedel's Weltchronik 1493 [image in public domain]

after 1200 AD. The original meaning of the English word 'town' is related to the German 'Zaun'. In England the term 'borough' (from 'burgh') was widely used. Heavily walled towns, though, were not as common in England as in Central Europe. Quite a few urban settlements in Western Europe date back to Roman times such as Cologne* , Mainz, Trier, London and York.

From 1000 AD onwards an interaction between the steady growth of the population on the one hand and an increase of agricultural production on the other stimulated the emergence of urban settlements.

This plate in Lavenham (England), which refers to the year 1257 AD, tells us about the development of this market town. Often such market towns came into existence close to a fortified manor house, or at a crossroads of trade routes, or at other convenient places.

Here peasants could sell the surplus* of their agricultural products and traders met the growing demand for more luxurious goods such as



Image 2: Memorial Plate, Lavenham, England. Photo E. Plüer



Image 3: Marktkreuz / Market Cross Trier AD 958 Photo E. Plüer

spices* silk and jewellery from the East. In the course of time more and more different trades developed in such places. Due to the new agricultural productivity of the villagers the craftsmen in towns could then devote most of their time to their trade.

The lord of such developing market towns profited from the toll on goods, the fines for the violations of the market regulations, and stallage (tax or rent for stalls*). In return the town lord had to provide the ground for the market, to protect the resident merchants and visitors, and to generally keep public order.

In some towns statues or monuments signified the market freedom and order, as for example in Trier.

Especially in the north of Germany such statues were called 'Roland'.

Around 1171 the chronicler* Helmholz narrates how the town of Lübeck on the Baltic Sea* came into existence: the local count had rebuilt the Segeberg Castle and enclosed* it with a wall. As the area was empty of people he sent messengers to various places and invited those

owning no land to come here with their families. They were promised to be given good and fertile* soil. A lot of people accepted the invitation. Later on Heinrich der Löwe (*Henry the Lion*), Duke of Saxony, took over. He, too, attracted a lot of people to settle down in Lübeck by granting them a number of privileges.

5 The size of towns varied considerably. Around 1300 AD Paris counted ca 200,000 inhabitants, Venice 110.000, Cologne 55,000 and London between 25,000 and 35,000. In 1363/34 AD the population of Trier numbered about 10,000 persons, less than a quarter the size of late Roman times. More than 90% of the towns-people lived in small towns varying in size between 200 and 2000 people.

10 Urban life seemed to become increasingly more attractive. Lübeck for instance recorded quite a great number of newcomers, especially in 1350 AD when the Black Death had raged. Newcomers would have to pay a kind of admission fee and take an oath of loyalty to the town council. In return they were granted protection and also promised peace and justice. In particular serfs (unfree peasants) frequently tried to improve their status by running off to towns. Usually, if they had managed to live in a town for a year and a day, they then were free.

15 Paying taxes* was a duty of all town dwellers. The amount of the tax due was fixed by self-declaration. Houses –up to three storeys high on average in the later Middle Ages –were huddled together in



Image 4: Lavenham England
15th c. Photo E. Plüer

20 In northern Germany you would find the living quarters as well as the workshop or office, on the ground floor. The upper storeys would be used for storage. In the south the family lived on the first upper storey. The outbuildings would include privies, a well, stalls, barns, washrooms. Up to 1200 AD timber was used as building material, although in some medieval towns you might also find residential towers built of stone as with this house in Trier. The house was owned by an alderman*.

25 A London order of 1189 AD required stone building and tiles* instead of thatched roofs. But earthenware and slate* were rather expensive and often too heavy for the walls.

30 Many townhouses had overhanging upper storeys which allowed for more space, but also restricted the light. Inside their houses it was often rather gloomy, as windows were small and usually covered with oiled parchment* or other material.

35 Streets were mostly lanes* and alleys* and often so muddy that walking became a problem. A chronicler from Augsburg recorded expressly the first paving of streets in 1415 AD. The names of streets often provide us with some historical information. Up to the end of the 18th century the town authorities of Trier did not prescribe street names, so medieval town dwellers invented ones which they thought useful and practical. In Trier there are names such as *Brotstraße*, *Fleischstraße*, *Juden-gasse*, *Weberbach*. In London you could come across names such as *Candlewick Street* (modern: *Canon Street*), *Needler's Lane*, *Roper Street* (modern: *Thames Street*), *Chicken Lane*.

40 Sanitation was a constant concern. Apart from goats and chickens town dwellers kept pigs which they allowed to run loose to search for food. In 1466 AD neighbours of a baker in Lübeck complained that he kept a pigsty* in his cellar.

45 The disposal of human waste was another big problem. It was sometimes dumped along the streets, but more often in cesspits*. The houses of some prominent merchants in Nuremberg had cesspits of 30 metres deep, but they were only cleaned every 30 years. Though there were already public latrines in medieval London people regularly relieved themselves from the upper storeys or in the streets.

The supply of drinking water was a major issue, too, though the term is somewhat misleading, as people avoided, whenever possible, drinking water. It was used for brewing the light, but probably not very tasty beer or for making the costly wine last longer. Often you would see open drain channels running along the sides, or down in the centre of the streets. Pipes carrying water were first used in monasteries and then spread to the towns. They usually ran along the edge of the street and finally ended up in the streams in the town. Wells in the back yards of larger houses often were contaminated* by the seepage* from toilets. London became the first medieval city in Western Europe to build a reservoir in 1237 AD when it became more and more obvious that the Thames was extremely polluted.

When you fell sick your family would have to take care of you. Poorer people living on their own might perhaps have had a chance to get into a hospital, if they were sick, though general hospitals to take care of the sick were unusual before 1200 AD. Most of these institutions were rather small. The hospital of St Giles (Norwich, England) looked after the wants of 13 poor daily and kept 30 beds for the sick. The rule of a hospital of Frankfurt/Main said once the poor and sick were able to walk again they were to be sent away. Hospitals depended very much on donations of richer citizens.

Aid for the poor was a severe problem in nearly all places. Tax records suggest that in many late medieval towns more than one third of the citizens could not pay direct taxes. In 1460 AD nearly a quarter of the taxable households in Lübeck lived in cellars, outbuildings and passageways. In Trier a number of poor lived in huts in the cemetery. Beggars, often crippled, were a common sight in most towns. The town council of Cologne ruled that those poor *“who go on the streets with open wounds and fractures must not let them be seen so that good people will suffer no stink, not unpleasantness.”* In 1363/64 AD about 42% of the citizens in Trier – slightly more than half of them women – belonged to the lower class, most of whom could barely make a living.

By 1300 AD all cities did their important business in writing, so they employed officials in chanceries*. Written trade agreements and merchant correspondence increased the demand for education. Some clerks had legal training in a cathedral school or university.

Education in the local language did not spread until after 1350 AD. The number of townspeople, who were able to read and write before the Reformation, is calculated as being between 10% to 30%.

In general bells were the main way of making announcements and of telling the time; town criers brought about news and made proclamations.

When night fell the gates of the medieval town were shut. Watchmen walked the dark streets with lanterns. In English towns they cried the ‘curfew’ (from the French *couvrir* and *feu* = *cover* and *fire*) or the curfew bell rang. This originally meant it was time for smiths, brewers and taverners and others to finish their working day.

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