The Church in the Medieval Town

T.R. Slater and
Gervase Rosser

About the volume:

This book examines the urban activities of the medieval institutional Church – parish and diocese, monastery and cathedral – which did so much to shape the origins and development of medieval towns. That influence is evident in buildings and town plans, in urban law and marketing of products, but also in conflict and negotiation between secular and Church authorities.

The contributors to this valuable collection of essays take examples from towns in many parts of the British Isles, and examine problems from a variety of academic viewpoints, to build on earlier work and to suggest new perspectives.

About the editors:

T.R. Slater is Reader in Historical Geography at the University of Birmingham. Gervase Rosser is Senior Tutor at St Catherine's College, University of Oxford.

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Edited by

T.R. SLATER and GERVASE ROSSER

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Preface

The Church permeated the life of medieval towns. Many towns were founded by churches or had a great church as their chief landlord, property developer or court-holder. The Church was also the creator and administrator of urban parishes, the focus for the religious devotion of the laity – often for its social organization as well – and the inspiration for the town's most important buildings. How can the urban role of the medieval church be best understood? Modern research into the development of towns in Britain, as in Europe, has raised questions which can only be answered by interdisciplinary collaboration. All too often promising early work on urban morphology by geographers or archaeologists had lacked a secure foundation in the study of that town's written documentation; all too often historians had delved into the archival riches of a town's records to illuminate its political history or its economic fortunes but had shown minimal interest in understanding the constraints imposed by the physical development of the townscape.

The University of Birmingham was fortunate in having a group of outstanding urban historians, geographers and field archaeologists interested in collaborative work at the very time that the Leverhulme Trust announced its intention to sponsor a series of major interdisciplinary research projects in the Humanities. The Trust's generous support for a five-year project on 'English Medieval Towns and the Church' enabled two Research Fellows, Dr R.A. Holt and Dr N.J. Baker – a historian and a geographer/archaeologist – to work on a collaborative and comparative study of West Midland towns, with a particular concentration upon Worcester and Gloucester. The overall co-ordination of the project and of the meetings of the group of Birmingham scholars to whom the Fellows reported their findings was my responsibility, but the detailed direction of the work on the historical and morphological and cartographic sides fell chiefly upon Dr A.G. Rosser and Dr T.R. Slater respectively. An essential component in the evolution of the project's strategy was the group of contributing scholars: Dr S.R. Bassett, Professor C.C. Dyer, Professor R.H. Hilton, Dr R.N. Swanson and Professor J.W.R. Whitehand who were later joined by Dr J. Röhrkasten and by a research student, Dr K.D. Lilley, working on the borough of Coventry.

The dialogue between the Research Fellows and the wider body of scholars both in Birmingham and beyond has been carried through to the project's final publications. We hope to fulfil the aims of collaborative research that the Leverhulme Trust sought to promote by showing

how understanding of the planning and growth of our medieval towns and of the varied roles of the Church in the town is transformed by effective interdisciplinary and co-operative research. My particular thanks go to the successive directors of the Leverhulme Trust, Sir Rex Richards and Professor B. Supple, for their support and interest throughout the project, to Professors C.N.L. Brooke and P.D.A. Harvey who refereed our initial application and maintained interest in our progress thereafter, to Mr H. Buglass, Mrs A. Ankorn and Mr N. Mudie for their superb cartography which graces this volume and has always been an essential precondition for understanding and visualizing the church in the town, and finally to Alec McAulay of Scolar Press for his keen interest and patient determination that the eventual publication should meet the highest standards of the different disciplines involved.

Nicholas Brooks
University of Birmingham

Introduction

T.R. Slater and Gervase Rosser

This volume derives from a major research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust at the University of Birmingham designed to explore the interaction of church and town in the medieval period in England. Part of the organizational framework of the project was a group of advisory researchers drawn from the history, geography and archaeology departments within the University of Birmingham who met at regular intervals to discuss the progress of the research and to add their particular expertise towards resolving the questions under investigation. In the final year of the project a research seminar was organized to expose the research methodology and preliminary results to a wider scrutiny from outside the University of Birmingham. It was always our intention to publish some of the papers from that seminar as one of the outcomes from the 'English Medieval Towns and the Church' project. As is often the case, intention has taken some time to reach fruition. None the less, the editors believe that the wait has been worth while and that this volume will be welcomed as reflecting some of the major themes under investigation by historians of the medieval town. The chapters fall neatly within the bounds of two major themes. The authors of Chapters 1 to 6 explore the social and economic dimensions of the interaction between church and town; in Chapters 7 to 12 the emphasis moves to the spaces and built forms of towns and their church buildings.

Society and economy

In Chapter 1 Rodney Hilton takes a broad view of contemporary class and status distinction in the urban context. Historians long ago reached a consensus that rural medieval society had, inbuilt, a conflict between landowners and the peasantry which was essentially a class conflict. This periodically manifested itself in popular discontent and physical violence. However, Hilton claims, the status and class dimensions of the population of towns are less well defined than for the countryside and historians have been slower in exploring the relationship between merchants and craftworkers; between landowners (including the Church) and both merchants and the poor. Hilton presents some of the evidence that can be gleaned from contemporary documentation in Britain and

France on these relationships and the ways in which they were manifested in status groups, dress codes and public ceremony and ritual. It was in this last that tension and conflict was contained, but also occasionally overflowed into riot. One such conflict, the 'Gladman' insurrection of 1443 in Norwich, is used to exemplify the actors involved.

Gervase Rosser develops this theme in much more detail in Chapter 2. He is concerned to examine the ways in which the inequalities in the social structure of towns are manifested in the realities of the political process; in particular, the ways in which the political élite needed to mobilize popular opinion in order to uphold their position. One of the most common types of dispute was that between the merchant élite and the clerical authorities in particular cities. Rosser takes the city of Hereford as his case study and examines in some detail the ways in which quarrels over ecclesiastical liberties in the city were important in affirming the identities of both town and church there. The separate jurisdictions of the king's fee, governed by a mayor and his aldermen since the grant of the fee farm in the twelfth century, the fee of the cathedral dean and chapter, and the bishop's fee were an inevitable source of conflict and negotiation. What is especially interesting is the way in which disorder was used by one side or the other to strengthen their negotiating position but that, always, there was the expectation that there would have to be a negotiated compromise. Relationships were deliberately engineered to crisis point so that particular problems could be reviewed and principles re-established. History was almost always appealed to, and the collective memory of the townspeople was regularly called to witness. Again, ritual processions on feast days, where town and church were supposedly demonstrating the unity of the city, were often the place in which orders of precedence demonstrated the levels of authority of different protagonists. The detailed evidence from Hereford is then used to make some comparisons with other cathedral cities in southern England.

This evaluation of conflict within the urban community is also a feature of John Edwards's Chapter 3, an analysis of Jewish–church relationships in British cities up to the expulsion of the Jews from England by Edward I, in 1290. The Jewish presence in England was mainly an urban one from the Norman invasion onwards, but it was also a dispersed one since nearly 60 towns in England and Wales had one or more Jewish families resident whereas only six cities had sufficient Jewish residents to make a visible community. Their principal function was to provide financial services to the Crown, the Church, townspeople and the barons in the shires. Edwards takes the well-known cases of the so called 'ritual murder' of young boys, beginning with William of Norwich, to explore the growing antagonism and

violence between the Christian and Jewish communities in these larger cities. This culminated in the slaughter of many of the Jewish community in London and York, as well as many smaller towns, on the accession of Richard I. A full study of the attitudes of the various social groups in England towards the Jewish community has yet to be made but this chapter goes some way towards that study by exploring the attitude of the Church, both locally and in a European context. Edwards shows that it was not until the reign of Henry III that papal canons restricting the contact between Christians and Jews were given effect in secular law. Important, too, at this time was the growth of the Dominican and Franciscan friars who sought to give practical effect to the edicts of the Third Lateran Council of 1179, that converting Jews should be welcomed. Houses of converts were established in Southwark, London and Oxford in the thirteenth century.

Christopher Dyer has made the study of the medieval urban economy very much his own. In Chapter 4 he examines from where, and from whom, the Church in the West Midlands purchased its goods and services. The urban hierarchy in the West Midlands has been subject to more investigation than any other region and it should be possible, says Dyer, to pose questions about the places of purchase of common everyday items and luxury or specialist items of consumption. Many monastic houses were at least partly self-sufficient, of course, but even they needed money for building works and gifts which involved people outside the monastic community. Dyer shows that the wealthiest churchmen made most of their purchases from outside the region altogether. London was the favoured centre for the Bishop and the Prior of Worcester, whilst the easy links with Bristol meant that other major purchases could be made there, most notably of wine and spices. Despite the overland journey, Boston was a favoured source of fish and cloth for these prelates. Worcester itself seems to have supplied relatively few of the needs of the cathedral priory. In smaller towns, adjacent monasteries often held the town in lordship and there was a much closer relationship economically. Grain, animals and foodstuffs were bought and sold in the local market but specialist services, such as painters, glaziers and goldsmiths were only found in the medium-sized towns. The hierarchical nature of this commercial network is shown to reflect that of society in general in this period. Clergy were an important sector of society, but they did not necessarily dominate or distort the economy of the towns which they patronized.

Despite the loss of the English mendicant order's archives, in Chapter 5 Jens Röhrkasten reviews the early development of friaries in London using a wide variety of sources so as to discern something of their initiators and early supporters. Friaries, of course, are essentially urban

institutions and the answers to these questions therefore tell us something of the religious stance of certain sectors of the urban élite in the thirteenth century. Within 70 years, eight mendicant orders had established friaries in London, more than almost any other city in Europe. Despite modest beginnings, they had a profound effect on the topographical development of the city, or more particularly its suburbs, as houses and land were acquired for their convents. In almost all cases, the early support of some of the most prominent ecclesiastics and aristocrats in London was significant in their foundation, but gifts from wealthy citizens and merchants quickly followed and the support of the Crown was constant in these early years, with gifts of both building materials and alms.

In Chapter 6, Robert Swanson takes a different sector of the urban church, the ordinary parish churches, and explores another topic in which archival sources are in short supply, namely the finances of these institutions in late medieval England since this might reasonably be expected to reflect something of the economic vicissitudes of the urban community at this time. Urban parish churches constitute an enormously complex set of institutions which vary significantly in their circumstances from place to place. The revenues of a single urban parish church with an extensive rural hinterland are clearly very different from a small, wholly urban church in a multi-parish town, whilst the appropriation of most of the revenues of many churches by monastic institutions and the like is also significant in any comparative assessment. The first part of Swanson's chapter explores something of this variety, and of the variety of income in cash and kind, that the limited sources reveal. The second part of his chapter concentrates on the financial records of the benefice of St Margaret's, Bishop's Lynn which survive for the period from the 1370s to the 1530s. This relatively long run of statistics is carefully analysed for the light it sheds on the fluctuating economy of the town. Generally, when all the complexities of different sources of income have been considered, the trend reflects a slow decline in the economy of this particular town.

Topography and built forms

The 'monastic town' has entered the literature as the distinctive contribution of Ireland to the re-establishment of urbanism in post-Roman Europe. In Chapter 7, Brian Graham attempts to resolve the paradox of having a separate theory of early medieval urbanization in Ireland by suggesting that monasteries and towns there can be understood as evolving with the emergence of a feudal society in exactly the same way

as elsewhere. Ireland was, of course, different from the rest of western Europe in having no Roman towns to provide a location for dioceses. Graham argues that early medieval monasteries in Ireland were as much secular as ecclesiastical institutions, and that the administration of both church and state was inextricably bound up in these sites from the eighth century onwards. Evidence for urban plot patterns (reflecting property laws) and for urban administration is lacking in all the monastic towns, and Graham's argument therefore focuses upon the form and function of urban defences. He takes as his model the division of early French cities into defended *cité* and merchant *bourg*, a variant on the 'urbs–suburbium' model of central-European writing. The principal morphological characteristic of the Irish monastic town is the double elliptical earthwork enclosure. The inner enclosure was reserved for the churches and monastic community as a spiritual sanctuary. However, Graham argues, there is little evidence to suggest that most of these enclosures date from the monastic foundation, many may well derive from the ecclesiastical reorganization of the twelfth century, following the Anglo-Norman invasion. The second morphological element of the monastic town model, the outer, secular enclosure is based on even less certain evidence as to chronology and, in some cases, their very existence. Consequently, Graham argues, it is inaccurate to talk of 'monastic towns' with a supposition of causative links between monastery and urbanism; rather, most of these places could have been defended towns where marketing, secular administration and the Church coalesced in the same way as elsewhere in Europe.

If there was nothing to distinguish the Irish monastic town from towns elsewhere in Europe then, clearly, this is also true about monastic towns in England. Terry Slater's chapter on the evidence for planning in towns dominated by monasteries of the Benedictine order affirms this. They, too, were places which were towns first and foremost, but in which the dominating building and institutional landholder was a monastery. He uses the example of St Albans, which is of crucial significance in the history of English urban development, since it is one of the few places in Britain where the common European phenomenon of a town developing around the shrine of a Christian burial in a Roman cemetery can be firmly established; in this instance, the tomb of the proto-martyr Alban. It is also a place in which the evidence from the later abbey chronicle suggests that the Benedictine community was engaged in a major exercise in town founding and town planning in the tenth century. Slater uses the evidence from town-plan analysis to suggest that the record of the chronicle can be accepted, but that the early town was not the simple tight-knit town around the triangular market space that earlier interpretations have suggested. This complexity of physical

development in a medieval planned town was characteristic of all towns, whether monastic or not, and, like Graham, Slater would see this example of town planning as fitting a European-wide development of towns and urban functions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Keith Lilley provides another example of the development of a Benedictine town in Chapter 9; in this instance the enigmatic case of Coventry. Enigmatic because the sudden rise of that city in the urban hierarchy in the twelfth century has never been satisfactorily explained. Once more it is the evidence of plan analysis that has provided the key to a model of the city's development which suggests that it was the founding of the Benedictine monastery in 1043 by Earl Leofric of Mercia which explains the beginnings of the town's development as well as the well-known tenurial division which was to become the focus of later-medieval disputes. The centre of the monastic-founded town was a large triangular market-place. This was later deliberately infilled by the cathedral priory as a way of increasing its rent roll. Similarly, the prior developed a new street in the growing city to provide a ceremonial way to the priory cathedral which did not involve passing through the earl's fee to the south and, later still, suburban land was developed on one of the major approach roads to the city. All this begins to make sense of the forged charters by which the priors attempted to rebuff the legal challenges to their successfully developing town made by the holders of the secular earl's fee.

The topographical theme pursued in Chapter 10 by Nigel Baker and Richard Holt is the origin of urban parish boundaries. Their studies of the topographical development of the cities of Worcester and Gloucester raised many questions about the development of this little-discussed plan element and, eventually, some answers to those questions. In both places the seventh-century minsters (St Peter's Abbey in Gloucester and the cathedral in Worcester) did not have a monopoly in the pastoral care of the townspeople even before the tenth century. The new parish churches of these two towns, however, were not provided by private citizens, as was often the case elsewhere, but by the Crown or the minsters themselves. The early parishes in both Worcester and Gloucester provide some support for Rogers's hypothesis that such parishes are recognizable from their large areas of extramural territory; however, this is only so for churches which were on the fringe of the contemporary urban area. There was another group of early churches wholly within the town. For this group, the archaeological evidence shows that parish boundaries were far from fixed by the twelfth century and that small-scale adjustments continued to be made well into the later medieval period and, in some cases, even beyond. There is also some support, especially in Worcester, for Keene's suggestion that, in Winchester

and London, parishes had been determined by a 'nearest church door' principle. But there are also significant anomolies from the expected pattern, some of which remain inexplicable, and there is more limited support for this hypothesis in the parish boundaries of Gloucester, other than those which were established in the twelfth century or later. An especially well-documented property in Gloucester provides a window on later medieval parochial boundary adjustment.

Another cathedral city provides the exemplar material in Chapter 11. Here Tim Tatton-Brown uses the building evidence of the parish churches of Canterbury to examine the changing ecclesiastical provision made for the people of that city and the changing fashions in urban parish church design. Given the enormous literature on the architectural history of English parish churches it is surprising that full surveys of urban churches are notable for their almost complete absence. Tatton-Brown's chapter, with its careful melding of architectural, archaeological, art historical and documentary evidence demonstrates why such a task, at least in those cities characterized by a multiplicity of small parish churches, has been so rarely undertaken. Only five of Canterbury's 22 medieval churches are still in ecclesiastical use, and only 11 survive in whole or in part above ground; for seven nothing is known other than their site. The evidence marshalled by Tatton-Brown shows how frequently the high medieval churches of the city were rebuilt in whole or in part, occasionally on completely new sites. Only two were demolished following the depredations of the plague. The post-medieval history of the churches is sketched in and then their parochial geography is considered. Tatton-Brown sees close analogies between the pattern in Canterbury and that in London as proposed by Brooke.

Finally, in Chapter 12, John Blair discusses the planning of minster church buildings in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He makes the link between the survival of the pattern of communal or collegial life and large cruciform churches being built or enlarged in the mid-twelfth to late thirteenth centuries. These churches had a typical plan of aisleless nave, double length chancel, crossing, and transepts with eastern chapels, in imitation of the greater churches of the regular monastic communities. The communities served by these former minster churches were very frequently urban because of the central-place functions attached to minsters and, consequently, the liturgical problems which had to be accommodated in the thirteenth century were those associated with the conflicting needs of the laity and the ecclesiastical communities for worship within a single architectural space. The increasing elaboration of the long chancel and crossing for the clerics, and of lesser altars in the transepts served by them for particular lay groups was one part of the pattern. This left the nave, with its rood under the west crossing

arch, and the later nave aisles as the principal secular spaces. This was a pattern which was to be reflected later in smaller country churches and in elaborate late-medieval urban churches with other patterns of collegiality.

The primary emphasis of these essays is upon the urban activities of the medieval church as a set of institutions: the parish, the diocese, the monastery, and the liberty. In these various institutional roles, the Church did much to shape both the origin and the development of the medieval town. Its influence is evident in architectural forms and in the topography of town plans; in structures of marketing and in the development of urban law. In each of these areas, as the various chapters in this volume demonstrate, the relationship of church and town could be at once mutually beneficial and a source of conflict. In exploring these fundamental themes, however, the contributors to the book shed light in addition on the vexed questions of secular attitudes to the Church and of the perceived role of Christianity in structuring, validating and, in various ways, disturbing, the lives of the Church's town-dwelling lay members. Despite their variety of academic viewpoints and the wide geographical spread of their exemplars, these chapters provide much material that both builds on earlier work and encourages reflection on some of the problems that are at the centre of the wider research project with its intensive investigation of the West Midland cities of Worcester and Gloucester, and which will be presented in a second volume.

CHAPTER ONE

Status and Class in the Medieval Town

Rodney Hilton

Medieval social theorists, who recognized that society was differentiated into social strata with unequal access to wealth and power, nevertheless insisted on the allegedly harmonious interrelationship of these strata. Their respective and particular functions were necessary for the survival of the whole, even though the different degree of 'honour' ascribed to each status group indicated a strict social hierarchy. In view of the fact that medieval society was riven by social conflict, peasant rebellions in particular, the social doctrine of status harmony can only be regarded as ideological rather than descriptive. As Georges Duby argues in his fundamental work, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme*, the concept was not a reflection of reality but a project for acting upon it.[1] And although a few historians have copied their medieval intellectual predecessors in interpreting medieval society as composed of interrelated status groups, most have recognized it as a class society, in which the conflict between landowners (both lay and ecclesiastical) and the peasantry was a permanent feature. A similar perception of class division and class conflict in the urban context is, however, less generally accepted and here, oddly enough, status rather than class tends still to be seen as defining social differentiation.

Theorists and preachers continued to the end of the Middle Ages, and beyond, to insist on the tripartite concept (prayers, warriors, workers). The social context of the scheme was essentially agrarian, but it had some relevance to towns. The higher churchmen and nobility were often lords of towns, and among the great range of town-dwellers were numerous clergy serving the parishes, chantries and fraternities, in addition to the gentry with town houses. The remaining townspeople were more difficult to fit into the conventions of the three orders. For example, merchants were scarcely workers in the normal sense, but nor can they be regarded easily as belonging with the aristocratic warriors. Moralists who identified the duties and delinquencies of different social groups were nevertheless obliged to bring in urban classes. Merchants appear as early as the twelfth century in the *Livre des Manières* of Étienne de Fougères, Bishop of Rennes and chaplain to Henry II

Plantagenet. Their faults and virtues are listed here and in later treatises, where they, and other urban classes, including artisans and journeymen, are integrated into the estate concept of social hierarchy.[2] This is well illustrated in the *Vox Clamantis* of John Gower, a late fourteenth-century English writer who was also a Kentish landowner with London connections. *Vox Clamantis* begins with a bitter attack on the rebels of 1382, expressed in a dream in which peasants are symbolized as animals failing to do their duties, such as asses refusing to carry their sacks to the city and oxen refusing to be yoked to the plough. It also includes a section which sketches the traditional tripartite model of the social orders and their duties: 'We know that there are three estates within which everybody lives as is customary . . . ' He continues with the traditional description of knights, clergy and peasants, but adds other social groups. Merchants are favourably presented, being necessary for the distribution of goods, even though fraud and usury in urban society is condemned. Gower includes artisans as lesser citizens who must live in agreement with the greater citizens, the merchants, for all to go well.[3]

An important aspect of modern historians' advocacy of 'estate' theory is that any manifestation of social discontent is dismissed as irrational, since its proponents assume that social classes, defined in economic terms, with genuinely conflicting interests, do not exist. As I have suggested, most agrarian historians do now in fact accept that the landowner–peasant confrontation was a class conflict. How is the problem of status and class confronted by historians of the medieval town?

Medieval urban society may not be as clearly identifiable as that of medieval agrarian society as one divided into classes with conflicting interests. A long tradition of historical writing emphasizes the antagonism between towns and landlords, parallel to the relationships found in the countryside between lords and peasants. Church landlords, and in particular monastic landlords, were especially prone to dispute with the towns over which they ruled.[4] As far as concerns relations among the townspeople themselves, however, a trend among historians of French and English towns rejects class analysis, and therefore tends to assume the irrationality of any form of rebellious action. Historians vary in their emphasis. Susan Reynolds, for example, realizes that conflicting class interests existed. However, she considers that the class antagonisms, that we may think their rational interests required, did not manifest themselves because they had faith in consensus and reconciliation. Others are more dismissive of popular discontent. Bernard Chevalier states that popular violence was simply due to the emotions of the poor. There was no class conflict, nor any idea of change. The poor were simply

angry because they thought that the rich were not doing their social duty. Jacques Rossiaud is equally dismissive of rebellion. For him, urban revolts were irrational violence provoked by rumour, and usually manipulated from above. Having acknowledged these views, it may be well to consider briefly whether an analysis of medieval urban society in terms of class structure is feasible.[5] In practice, even some urban historians who are doubtful about class analysis provide useful descriptions of urban class structures. Philippe Wolff does this, in his work on social movements in fourteenth-century Languedoc, even while he attempts to dismiss concepts of class conflict by declaring that there were rich and poor in every social class.[6] Urban class structures are not, in fact, difficult to define, even though analysis of inter-class relations is more problematical than in the case of agrarian society.

An economic definition of the main producing class of the medieval town, the manufacturing artisans, is relatively straightforward. The basic unit of production was the family household, generally nuclear but sometimes extended to include close collaterals. This would be enlarged as the master craftsman employed apprentices and journeymen, seldom more than two or three (and the latter tended to be non-resident), additional to family members. Even though many urban artisan households might have small plots of land[7] they did not, as did most of the peasantry, produce their own means of subsistence. Their production was entirely for the market, whether they sold direct to the final consumer or through merchant intermediaries. Urban artisans paid rent, but rent was not so important an item in the incomes of urban rulers as it was of rural landlords.[8]

The artisan households did not by any means include the whole of the working population of the medieval town. Apart from retail traders, a not easily definable group, there was a considerable population of unskilled workers outside the structures of the craft workshops, such as labourers in the building trades. Some might have a reasonably stable existence, but they also shaded off into a fluctuating class of marginals, difficult to define, which – especially in the bigger towns – included transient immigrants from the countryside.

Urban ruling classes, though complex in composition, are not hard to define. In both France and England there existed landowners with both urban as well as rural property. Before the thirteenth century, indeed, these were often more important in the ruling structures of urban society than the merchants. Such land-owning knights were prominent, for example, in the towns of Provence and Languedoc in the twelfth century, but in the thirteenth they were being joined and even superseded by merchants. The land-owning element was, of course, not peculiar to southern France in the early period. The twelfth-century

patricians of Arras were originally landowners, as were those of twelfth-century London.[9] But in most English towns there was already by the twelfth century a distinct mercantile element, with some political strength, as was manifested in their *gilde mercatorie*.[10] From the thirteenth century onwards, in both countries, the mercantile element became generally predominant among the bourgeoisie, even where feudal land-owning interests remained influential.

Class relationships in the towns did not seem so clearly exploitative as in the countryside, where the manor or *seigneurie* was the focus of power. There were, of course, centres of feudal power in towns, such as the castles, urban houses and estates of the lay aristocracy, but especially the jurisdictional enclaves of the ecclesiastics, by which bishops, monasteries and friaries claimed special privileges within sections of the larger towns. But as far as urban merchants were concerned, their economic relationship with the class of manufacturing craftsmen was expressed in market terms. As always in such relationships, exploitation, where it existed, was covert. Merchants fixed the terms of trade, as putters-out of raw material and sellers of the finished product, as middlemen, or as urban rulers who exercised control over the market. More overt clashes between classes were those concerning wages and hours of work which opposed craft masters and journeymen, whose hopes of becoming masters themselves declined in both France and England from the fourteenth century onwards.

We do not, however, leave urban revolt behind once we have considered the economic grievances mentioned so far. There was also an element of class conflict which, in some ways, was analogous to peasant protest against rent increases. This class conflict, from the twelfth century onwards, consisted of numerous episodes, ranging from peaceful protest to violent and concerted action, provoked by what was seen as unjust and corrupt taxation. Urban tax was a levy on artisan households not unlike the levy of rural rent and, in view of the effective exclusion of the artisans from genuine participation in town government, could readily be perceived as arbitrarily imposed. From the rebellion in London led by William FitzOsbert in the 1190s through to the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century tax rebellions in French towns, it is clear that taxation was a major issue in urban social politics over a wide area and a long period. These conflicts have been well documented and described by French and English historians, even though they have by no means always been identified as class conflicts.[11]

If urban classes, and merchants in particular, were represented in moralizing literature as 'orders', was this perception of the social hierarchy adopted by the urban élites themselves? One of the most interesting ways in which status, as distinct from class, was expressed was the

hierarchical description which emphasized, not the real hierarchy of wealth and power, but a hierarchy of moral worth. Urban administrative documents in both English and French towns are full of such designations, and this way of describing the upper end of the urban social hierarchy was used by the English royal chancery from the thirteenth century.[12] Almost universally in medieval English towns, the ruling groups of merchants were referred to as *probi homines* or *prud'hommes*, that is, 'worthy men'. Similar terminology was equally widespread in French towns. Other designations in use were analogous, such as 'the more worthy citizens' of Lincoln and Winchester, the 'best of the citizens' of Newcastle under Lyme, the 'better sort' in Hereford. The ruling élite at Lyons were described as the 'greater and better'; at Tours they were the 'honourable men'. The *probi homines* of Avignon 'were truly honourable and lived like knights'. The wardens of some craft-guilds in Languedoc were sometimes referred to as *probi homines*, but in general, and especially in French towns, the rest of the population was described as 'the lesser people' *le menu peuple*. In thirteenth-century Canterbury, they were described as the 'lesser and weaker (*infirmior*)' part, as against the 'greater and healthier (*sanior*)', that is, the mercantile élite. When the 'greater people' of Shrewsbury fled to the countryside at the time of the Black Death, the 'lesser people' who took over the government of the town were referred to as *animales viles*.[13]

Status designations in terms of moral rather than material distinction were symbolically reinforced in England at the national level by the sumptuary regulations issued by the king's government. The statute of 1363 which attempted, without success, to impose the rule of 'one man, one trade', in order to deprive urban craftsmen of the right to engage in commerce as well as manufacture, also contained a typical set of sumptuary regulations. These laid down what garments people might wear, and even what food they might eat, according to their status. They were not effective, indeed the statute was repealed, but similar regulations were repeated as late as 1464.[14] They also provide a scale of status equivalences between town and country which are of some interest. Ordinary servants, whether of country lords or of urban merchants and master craftsmen, were not to eat meat and fish more than once a day, and were to consume other victuals, such as milk and cheese, 'according to their estate'. Their wives and daughters could only wear veils below a certain price. Craft journeymen were allowed to wear a slightly more expensive cloth, but not silk, silver cloth, girdles, knives, garters, brooches and so on. Their wives and daughters should not wear veils of silk but only of native fabric. No furs of higher status than sheep, rabbit, cat and fox were allowed. Merchants and master craftsmen who had chattels worth the high sum of £500 or more were allowed to wear the same

apparel as gentry who had incomes of £100 a year. If they had chattels worth £1,000 they could dress like esquires with £200 a year. (It hardly needs saying that craftsmen with £1,000 worth, or even £500 worth, of chattels would be very rare.) But the king's sumptuary legislation was merely echoing the contemporary emphasis on status, which is made explicit in the theorizing about the orders of society in the moralistic literature and sermons.

Another theoretical concept which emphasized the theme of harmony within divergence and the divinely ordained functions of the various social strata was the ancient analogy between the social order and the human body. It was reiterated in the twelfth century by John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres, in his *Policraticus*. It was used again in a sermon by Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373–89). As usual, kings are represented by the head and peasants, and labourers by the feet. Unlike John of Salisbury, Brinton introduces the urban classes. The left hand represents merchants and the faithful artisans. The heart, being in the centre of the body, represents the citizens and burgesses.[15] It was a sufficiently common, not to say banal, image to be enunciated in a royal order of 1267 banning unauthorized meetings in London on the grounds that 'all persons of the city, rich as well as poor, should be, as it were, one body and one man, faithfully and in fealty to maintain the peace'.[16] By the end of the fourteenth century, the image of the city as a body corporate had become widespread and was the essence of much civic ceremony.

Ceremony, whether associated with feasting and rejoicing or with solemn ecclesiastical ritual, was clearly recognized in medieval towns as a means of promoting social cohesion. The celebration of Corpus Christi, invented as one of the year's holy celebrations and saint's days in the early fourteenth century, provided a useful form of civic ceremony, in which the analogy between the civic body and the body of Christ was emphasized. Many English urban governments organized processions composed of mercantile and craft-guilds, often associated with the performance of pageants representing stages in universal Christian history, from the Creation to the Last Judgement.[17] Guild processions on Corpus Christi day emphasized both hierarchy and unity. At Coventry, typically, the most humble – the poor fishmongers – led the way, and the rich drapers brought up the rear. Although the Corpus Christi processions most obviously emphasized the unity of the civic body, other ceremonial processions performed essentially the same function. The sequence of processions following the election of London's mayor at the end of October began with a journey, in which he was accompanied by representatives of the guilds, through the city streets to the exchequer at Westminster. From there they returned to the cathedral of

St Paul, and visited other city churches on subsequent feast days. Similar ceremonies followed the election of the mayor of Bristol in September, linked with the elections of the masters of the craft-guilds: the mayor and sheriff distributed gifts of wine to the 21 crafts.[18]

Presents of wine and other such diversions were evidently regarded as an essential feature of civic ceremony in French towns, too, especially on the occasions of the 'joyous entries' of kings, queens and dukes. Free wine flowed from the fountains of Paris on the occasion of Isabel of Bavaria's entry in 1389. When the dukes of Brittany entered Breton towns, minstrels were hired for the entertainment of the people, 'to give them a relief from an otherwise difficult existence'. Even the carnivals and the *fêtes des fous* of the thirteenth century, which started as spontaneous demonstrations of 'the world turned upside down' by young men and low-ranking clerics, were, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, taken over by the civic authorities. They were allowed to retain their festival aspect and even some elements of ridicule, but in practice were cleverly manipulated by the ruling urban élites as harmless ways of 'letting off steam'.[19]

On the other hand, in spite of the generally successful containment of carnival within civic ceremonies acceptable to urban authorities, some forms of popular ceremony remained potential vehicles for disruption of the social order. This is illustrated by an episode in the cloth-manufacturing city of Norwich in the middle of the fifteenth century.[20] In 1377, Norwich was the fifth largest town in England; by 1523 it had become the second largest. In addition to being a cathedral city and county town, its manufacture of woollen and worsted cloth was of great importance. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the city itself had acquired county status, and was ruled by a mercantile oligarchy: a mayor, two sheriffs and a council of 24 aldermen or *probi homines*. The less important common council of 60 freemen was also merchant-dominated, admitting only a few master craftsmen as members. Mercers were overwhelmingly predominant among the ruling élite, and were closely linked with local feudal landowners, such as the Earl of Suffolk and many landed gentry. This alliance was expressed in the Guild of St George, founded in 1385, an essentially mercantile fraternity but one which included members from the local gentry and nobility. It became so closely identified with the dominant elements in the ruling élite that it was integrated into the governing body of the city from 1452. The mayor automatically became alderman of the guild for a year after completing his term of office. All aldermen were automatically members. The guild excluded craftsmen from its membership. When, in 1463, a shoemaker was elected to the common council, it was decided that it would be a dishonour to the city and the Guild of St George if a person of such a craft should be admitted.

Norwich politics did not simply reflect a division between the craft and mercantile interests, however. In the mid-fifteenth century there were rival factions within the mercantile body itself. One of these was associated with the county nobility and gentry, many of the latter, as we have seen, being members of the Guild of St George. This faction was also favourably inclined to the ecclesiastical landowners who held property in and near the city. The other, although occasionally (and unsuccessfully) appealing for help to the Duke of Gloucester, was hostile to the feudal, and especially to the ecclesiastical, landowners. It was associated with a somewhat obscure 'Bachery' (bachelors') guild and tended to seek allies among the city craftsmen, who were also hostile to the feudal presence in the city. Aristocratic politics were also involved: the 'popular' party's hostility to the 'Lancastrian' magnates, such as the Earl of Suffolk, eventually led them to become supporters of the 'Yorkist' party and to benefit from the arrival of the Yorkist dynasty in 1461.

The troubles of the 1440s focused on antagonisms between the majority of the townspeople and the feudal–ecclesiastical interests within the city.[21] The Benedictine cathedral priory was not only a wealthy landowner and appropriator of parish churches throughout East Anglia, but had privileges and jursidiction within the city of Norwich. It had lordship over extensive parts of the city, and over the two Tombland fairs (at Whitsun and Trinity Sunday), deriving from them a considerable profit. The nearby nunnery of Carrow held and profited from a September fair, as did the Magdalen Hospital from another in July. Jurisdictional conflicts also arose with two other ecclesiastical corporations, the abbeys of Wendling and St Benet of Hulme. The antagonism between the city and these ecclesiastical corporations was made even worse when the Crown was persuaded to declare that the priory had never been part of the city, and to take the suburbs, where some of the ecclesiastical property was situated, away from city jurisdiction by pronouncing them to be part of the county.

Early in 1443, an extraordinary procession made its way through the streets of Norwich, led by one John Gladman. This ceremony seems to have focused much of the tension which underlay relations between the city and the ecclesiastical interests. Ceremonies were organized on a regular basis in Norwich, as in Coventry and elsewhere, no doubt as a way of dampening down lower-class antagonism to the city's rulers. The evidence for the elaboration of Corpus Christi processions and guild plays in Norwich comes from the late 1440s and the 1450s: perhaps significantly a period of serious social and political tension in the city. The nature of the Gladman ceremony, however, is not entirely clear, except that it was perceived by a hostile jury in the aftermath as a subversion of due hierarchy and civic harmony. Gladman is said to