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Urban Europe Between the Industrial Revolutions

The essence of the city is a permanent population, plus a marketplace, and a shift from human relations based on status to those based on free contract.¹

(Fernand Braudel)

The City and Max Weber

Since the cities of Europe took form in a political, social and economic environment that remained overwhelmingly rural and agrarian even in the early eighteenth century, it is clear that the early development of European urbanisation was conditioned by political and economic structures that transcended the city proper. The German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) is best known for the distortion of his views by the English economic historian R. H. Tawney, who tried to explain economic growth as the result of aspects of Protestant religious doctrine.² This is most unfortunate, for the heart of Weber’s work, which was once dismissed by historians who were wedded to Henri Pirenne’s idea of the city as a purely economic creation, has profound insights that provide an indispensable reference for any student of comparative urbanisation.

Weber argued that the city was the catalyst of a ‘trend toward rationality’ that distinguished western European institutions from the patriarchal and ‘charismatic’ regimes of other parts of the world. ‘Rational’ denotes an attitude that is more receptive to innovation and the interplay of competing ideas than the ‘traditional’ mentality, to which it is contrasted. Legal institutions that guaranteed individuals’ rights against the state were a crucial aspect of Weberian rationality. The development of an interregional market network and sophisticated commercial techniques pioneered intellectual innovation, notably calculation in both the specific and abstract senses. In purely economic terms, all cities are market oriented, particularly toward consumption of goods, but those of the West were

unique in having partial autonomy from regional authorities and in their development of an urban law that was distinct from that of the territorial state in which the city nested. Weber did not think that fully autonomous cities were a necessary component of urban growth or capitalism, for he realised that the privileges that princes granted to favoured towns were instrumental in the prosperity of some places and the decline of others. He spoke of ‘politically oriented capitalism’ and thought that the Italians eventually lost economic primacy to the north Europeans because of an irrational political naïveté that was illustrated by their enormous loans to princes who were poor credit risks. But Weber also defined the city in terms of social and cultural characteristics and values, which included tradition.³

In this book I am incorporating receptivity to competition into a neo-Weberian notion of rationality. Competition for markets and resources became apparent when the city first began differentiating itself as a type from rural Europe around 1100. Between about 1275 and the early seventeenth century, competition for markets and resources was intense, although there were decelerating forces that fostered conformity. It is undeniable, for example, that many nominally occupational guilds, when they gained control of city governments, tried to stifle competition among masters and create monopolies for their masters. But the consequences of this were felt mainly in industrial conservatism and protectionism, which had less impact than was once thought on capital formation in the cities. Furthermore, competition existed within the guilds themselves, both among masters who vied for the same markets and between guild elites and the rank and file membership for supplies, markets and honours.

The earliest medieval cities were local markets, particularly for agricultural goods. The inhabitants obtained what they needed without leaving their homes; rather the professional merchant brought goods from distant places. The growth of long-distance trade, in many cases accompanied by the development of manufacturing, led urban elites, most of whose members had originated as local landholders trading in the agricultural products that were grown on their estates, to seek new markets. The city was thus the primary agent of commercial capitalism, which dominated the European economy in the period covered by this book. ‘Fixed capital’ such as land and buildings was very important in the rural economy but was less critical in the cities, especially in manufacturing, since (except for mining) most industrial technology was simple and did not require substantial capital investment. Persons who had money to invest tended to put it into goods and services for themselves, thus generating local demand.⁴

Commercial functions were thus more instrumental than industrial ones in fixing the urban map of Europe during these centuries, for industrial goods must have a demand market created through the infrastructure of a commercial network: craftsmen could not make large quantities of shoes, pots or cloth without having some reason to assume that someone would buy them. Many cities, such as those of northern Italy, were already large before they developed exportable industry, while others, such as Metz, never developed such industries but nonetheless became large regional market centres. The fact that most wealth was

created by trade does not, however, mean that industrial production was insignificant. Important technological changes provided Europeans with exportable goods that were exchanged for the exotic products of the east. On the eve of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, Europe already had the world's strongest industrial capacity.⁵

By 1100 a market economy was firmly in place: all settlements were at least farm markets and had some basic utilitarian manufacture of consumer goods. While the town obviously depended on its rural environs for its food and industrial raw materials, the countryside depended on the town for exchange and manufactured goods. As the townspeople gained control of their own market mechanisms, they tried to reduce the cost of goods that they bought from country-dwellers. Although greater per capita profits, as well as higher risks, were to be had in long-distance trade than in local exchange, the long-distance profit argument becomes much stronger after 1300 and particularly with the onset of the colonial movements in the fifteenth century.⁶

The plethora of small, internally decentralised states, together with the presence of cities with rights that could not be violated by the central or territorial state, was critical to the development of competition and also of the regional interdependence that is still characteristic of Europe. Competition involves vying for resources within a recognised framework of contract and law. Acquisition and concentration, and also alienation of property, were easier under urban than under rural law, particularly as most values came to be expressed in monetary terms. But the European urban system was flexible enough to survive the transition to industrial capitalism and even to facilitate that transition. Before the Industrial Revolution, both large cities and small towns had highly differentiated occupational structures: but in the small towns this consisted of a larger number of crafts than was found in villages, while the diversity in the economies of the larger cities was in types of goods sold and services provided.⁷

Some scholars have built on Weber's idea to argue that the city was the driving force behind the commercial capitalism that made possible European domination of a 'modern world economy' in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with the major cities functioning as a 'core' whose continuing contacts with one another served to integrate the peripheries. This view is associated particularly with Immanuel Wallerstein, who saw rural agricultural and industrial production as responding to urban demand, which provided the local linkage of the region into the world market. Yet there is a logical problem with the chronology of Wallerstein's thesis: both urban networks and commercial capitalism had existed in the medieval period. The developments that Wallerstein saw beginning in the sixteenth century could at most have accelerated trends that were already structurally in place.⁸

Urban Europe c. 1100

Europe had few large cities in the late eleventh century, but even then there was a tremendous disparity between the number of persons actually living in urban

centres and their importance to the economy and to political and cultural institutions. By 1100 most major cities of Europe, although small, were established communities that accordingly functioned as markets. The few that have originated since then are associated with a deliberate act of foundation. Fortunately, the arid historiography of urban origins is outside the chronological limits of this book. Despite the ferocity with which their proponents advocate them, the theories of why cities came into existence are not irreconcilable; the diverse cityscape of Europe has numerous examples of each type. Furthermore, while a single function can bring a settlement into existence, the characteristics that originate it are not always the same as those that foster its growth. The essence of urbanisation is plurality of functions, which can only come through sustained evolution.

The market – and hence the city – develops at the intersection of supply and demand. This is a far more complex matter than simply one place having a stock of goods for which a market exists somewhere else. There can be shortages and surpluses of labour as well as property. As examples, the two most important urban concentrations of pre-modern Europe developed on economic frontiers. The Italian cities originated in local trade, but their great prosperity was caused by geography: Italian merchants were the natural middlemen for the goods of the Levant, which were in high demand in the west. The second great urban pole, the southern Low Countries and northern France, is less obviously a frontier. Flanders was a poor coastal region whose western part was mainly pastoral until the swamps were reclaimed in the twelfth century. Ghent, Flanders' largest city, began as a transshipment point between northern France, which produced surpluses of food, and agriculturally poor northern Flanders.⁹ Forced to trade, the Flemings began manufacturing cloth with native wool, then specialised in luxury cloths made from finer English wool that had to be imported. The exhaustion of strategic natural resources in the rural environs of Flanders thus led to importing and hence an expansion of the economic region. In Italy this occurred too, but chiefly when the grain supply of the environs of the great cities became unable to feed them. The resulting exchange, not a natural surplus, made both regions great.¹⁰

Cities originated to meet simple needs, but then they attracted trade, political functions and educational facilities. Roads were diverted to the cities, canals were built, and princes naturally sought major population concentrations for their governments and gave privileges only to selected towns. Urban systems also tend to be stable also because urban capital is a constant. Considerable resources are invested in the infrastructure of the city itself: buildings, roads and governing apparatus, not to mention the activities of city people in moneylending and employment. Large cities, with more capital, thus have more jobs, and production and will grow faster absolutely, but not necessarily relatively, than in smaller places. The complexity of operations found among late medieval merchants was simply not feasible in small places with less differentiated labour forces.

England had had the highest urban density of northwestern Europe before the Norman Conquest, but thereafter punitive taxation, the destruction of houses in the larger cities to make way for castles, and the reorientation of trading links

from Scandinavia and Germany toward Normandy and France provoked urban decline. The Flemish cities grew in response in the decades around 1100. France was a kingdom only in theory in 1100, and the varieties of early urbanisation there reflect its territorial diversity. Paris was still considerably smaller and less sophisticated in function than such places as Toulouse, whose enormous Roman wall was only then being repopulated. More typical were Roman centres such as Troyes, where the truncated Roman wall of the third century, enclosing the *civitas* or the 'city' proper, sheltered the bishop, the count if he had not been excluded from the town in conflicts with the bishop, and sometimes a few artisans and merchants. Germany had numerous markets, but the only large cities were either repopulated Roman centres along the Rhine, bishoprics or settlements where a castle had preceded the establishment of a bishopric. Farther east, places founded in and after the ninth century as bulwarks of conversion and administration against the Danes and Slavs, such as Hildesheim, Hamburg and above all the border bishopric of Magdeburg, became nuclei of colonisation and conversion.

Italy south of Rome had the largest concentration of large cities in Europe in 1100, but northern Italy quickly overtook the south in the twelfth century. Venice controlled most of the European trade in oriental luxuries, notably edible spices, dyes and cloth, which were imported through the Byzantine Empire, the caravan routes across Asia, and in the twelfth century the crusader states and the islands of the eastern Mediterranean. Genoa would become the great rival of Venice for near eastern markets, but the Genoese concentrated more on forging trading links with the Muslim states of North Africa and Iberia, and the Christian kingdoms that were extending their borders southward at the expense of the caliphate. Florence was still considerably smaller than other Tuscan towns, notably Siena and then-coastal Pisa. In Lombardy Milan rapidly achieved domination in the early twelfth century through its control of land routes across the Alps and southward into Italy.

The Low Countries were the last great urban region of western Europe to develop, but they quickly became the most important concentration of towns north of the Alps. Flanders, in the southwest, was the most precocious part. Ghent and Bruges developed on sites that had been abandoned by the Romans, but in each case the nucleus from which the later town evolved was a fortification of the count of Flanders. Ypres, the third great Flemish city, developed at the point where the Yser river ceases to be navigable, a common feature of the early history of medieval cities. Little of the Flemish towns' early history suggests their later greatness, but the chronicle of Galbert of Bruges (1128) shows the larger ones had considerable power, which they used to extract charters from the two contenders for the Flemish countship. From a base in local trade, Ghent and Ypres developed important textile industries. Bruges also manufactured cloth, but its great prosperity came from the fact that in the eleventh century the high sea level made it a coastal port. As the waters receded, Bruges, although inland, became the most considerable port city of northern Europe by founding new towns on its canal links to the sea, then relentlessly suppressing their attempts to free themselves.

What Is a Town?

Several features were shared by virtually all major towns of the twelfth century, and still characterised European urbanisation into the late seventeenth. First, the cities grew up around markets, primarily although not exclusively where food and other raw materials were exchanged. With rare exceptions trade was more important than industry in creating urban wealth. This involved more than simply providing a place where farmers could sell their goods and reselling locally produced or grown items on a wider market outside the region. The demand market in the cities for luxuries, initially from princes and prelates but soon from the urban elites themselves, was a critical element in early exchange. The cities were always dependent on the agrarian economy of their environs, most obviously for food but also for exportable goods such as wine, which was generally taken to the city, taxed, then re-exported. By 1700 about 10 per cent of the population of France was involved in some aspect of wine production and distribution, and it was only at this late date that rural brokers and shippers began to challenge significantly the stranglehold of the merchants of the port towns on wine exports.¹¹

Second, cities that were solely industrial were highly exceptional before 1700, and most of them did not prosper. Industry was usually site-based and thus was less likely than trade to attract capital. But north European urbanisation was transformed in the late eleventh century by the first of two industrial revolutions that fundamentally altered internal relations in many cities and their economic and social bonds with their environs. The development in northern France of the complex mechanical loom for weaving heavy woollen cloth urbanised an industry that had previously been rural and gave northwestern Europe an exportable commodity for the first time. Textile manufacturing added immensely to the population base of the principal cities, but most urban centres made little if any cloth for export: rather, they produced coarser cloth for local consumption. Industry did, however, contribute to the formation of city-centred trading regions. It also fostered interregional trade, for although the cities had the labour necessary for operating the looms and to provide diversification and specialisation of the workforce, they had to import the wool, dyes and other raw materials. Specialisation is often seen as characteristic of industrial towns, and this is probably more true of modern cities than of medieval ones. But it is necessary for an economy to advance beyond subsistence level, and the specialists cannot be isolated from one another. The city provides a locale where they can be roughly co-residential and thus interact with maximum efficiency.¹²

Thus a high level of occupational differentiation in both trade and industry is a third characteristic of the pre-modern city. Urban labouring populations can be categorised very roughly into 'basic' and 'non-basic' producers. The 'basic' producer brings income into the community. Examples are monks or priests, whose income comes from rents from their rural estates, or officials of a territorial government based in the town, or artisans who produce for export or the draper who 'puts out' work to various artisans, then sells the finished product. The

'non-basic' producers derive their income from the locality itself and satisfy the needs of the basic producers: examples are purveyors of food and drink, construction workers and shoemakers. These categories clearly cannot be adhered to rigidly: weavers, for example, produced different grades of cloth, some exportable and some not. Furthermore, many persons had sidelines to their major occupations. Still, demographic models suggest that pre-industrial urban populations are divided roughly evenly between basic and non-basic producers.¹³ The occupational diversity of the city thus involves persons in legally regulated competition for the same and diverse markets that are interconnected and produce a market network that may be site-based initially but has the resources to expand.

This in turn means that as cities develop more exportable industries and/or skills, and as their populations increase accordingly, persons in service occupations will be attracted by the job opportunities that the city offers. Yet in most cities whose occupational structure can be delineated from surviving sources, the service sector of non-basic producers is too large for the model. The total population of the city includes the families of the basic and non-basic producers; but most basic producers who moved to the city did not come with their families, but rather were single and eventually took spouses who were already domiciled there. The non-basic population thus tends to grow more rapidly than the basic and creates a demand for still more locally produced goods and services, which in turn become a major part of the central function that the town provides.

The basic/non-basic model can help us to understand why exportable industry was much less important than commerce as a generator of wealth in the pre-modern city. A new factory/industry will increase the number of basic economic activities, add to the permanent population and generate income for the town, but it does not attract people directly to the town's market, since the consumers of the goods that are manufactured there may live in some distant place. This is particularly important with the smaller places, whose regional importance may depend on their markets, which characteristically are held only at intervals, more than on total permanent population. There is a tendency for a place to become more industrial the larger it gets, although an absolute correlation cannot be made. Medieval industry was almost without exception labour-intensive; thus the more industry a place had, the more labourers it required. The other correlation is with a large region that the city dominated for basic market exchanges, including food: a large city with a small region would have to have considerable industry, but a large city developing in a large region might not have much industry.

Cities are thus by their nature multifunctional. Even if one general line of work dominates, such as education or trade, all are present and will have some weight in determining the city's role in its region. Probably no pre-modern city was as functionally specialised as modern industrial cities tend to be. John Marshall speaks of a 'principle of vulnerability':

the likelihood of a city's falling on hard times is inversely proportional to the diversification of its economy: the more diversified the city, the more

easily it should be able to survive regional or national recession or depression. Conversely, the more specialised the city, the more vulnerable its residents will be to economic hardship in times of stress.¹⁴

The cities of late medieval Flanders, whose dependence on English wool for their export-grade textiles limited their diplomatic options, are an excellent example.

A fourth aspect of pre-modern cities is that they were important as centres of religion and eventually of secular culture. The presence of the bishopric in the repopulated Roman ‘city’ was an important element of topographic and, to a lesser extent, functional continuity with Roman urbanisation, as we shall see in Chapter 3. The close link between religious institutions and the growth of urbanisation is especially strong in England where, in contrast to the continent, the first cathedrals were often rural or built in towns that did not flourish. From the late eleventh century, however, some bishoprics were being moved into places that were developing into towns, either situating just inside the walls or distorting the street plan by clearing away previous tenements to make room for the church.¹⁵

Fifth, the pre-modern city had good communications, which conditioned the quantity and variety of raw materials that it could import, and thus affected the nature of its industrial products and the consumer goods it could offer to its inhabitants. The earliest population growth in most cities developed along the artery from which their food came, even when this was the smaller of the routes that led into the city. Yet while a decent land route could suffice for this purpose, cities that developed significant export industry or re-sold the raw materials of their environs over large distances required better links. Thus most cities

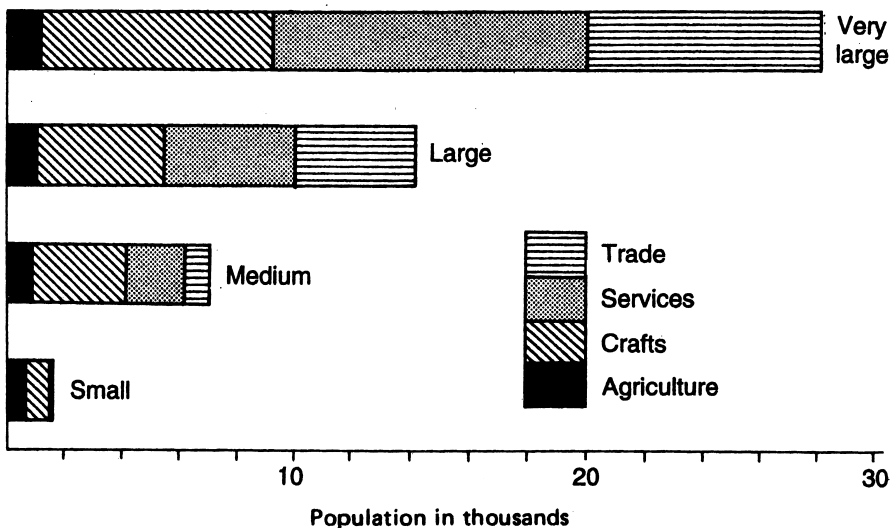


Figure 1.1 Functional differentiation and urban population: a model

that became large after 1100 were located on navigable interior waterways that provided easy communication and were well suited to the large-scale transport of goods. The major exceptions among cities that were significant by 1100 were Venice, on the Adriatic coast, and landlocked Milan, which developed as a bishopric and agricultural market. Milan and Nuremberg, which developed later on land routes, both undertook an intense program of canal building.¹⁶ Yet the importance of overland traffic cannot be discounted: the Champagne fairs, the most important depots for interregional trade for much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, could not be reached except by combining water and overland travel.

Sixth, pre-modern urban populations were highly mobile. Urban fertility was generally lower than rural, and death rates were always higher. Thus the city could grow only through substantial immigration, most of it from the rural environs, although the extent to which this was true diminished as the city became larger and its region wider. Since the city must attract immigrants in order to survive, its population will be more diverse than that of rural villages, even if most immigrants come from nearby. In practice this meant that most cities developed in areas of high rural population density.¹⁷

A seventh feature common to west European cities during this period is a close link to their seigniorial antecedents, which in turn involved social and economic bonds with their rural environs. The cities of northern Europe, although not those of Italy, were once thought to have developed through the growth of long-distance trade, essentially independently of the countryside. This view, which is associated with the great Belgian urban historian Henri Pirenne, is now rejected by most scholars in favour of an organic approach that sees city and village as different degrees of the same phenomenon of settlement growth.¹⁸

By 1100 most cities of western Europe were making the transition 'from seigniorial to economic urbanisation' and were market centres with recognised legal rights.¹⁹ Those of Germany east of the Elbe and Scandinavia were exceptions, only developing a significant urban merchant class in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Yet virtually all towns originated on the domain of a lord, who generally kept substantial rights in them even after some measure of local autonomy was granted in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The urban markets depended on the presence of country-based lords and clergy who bought the luxuries that the city merchants imported and whose fortifications protected the settlement. The cities were always foci of local administration, and from the fifteenth century, with the centring of the bureaucratic state in provincial and national capitals, the 'basic' category of officeholders who were paid from sources extraneous to the city of their residence grew immensely. This constitutes a major distinction between the medieval and early modern town, except perhaps in France, where upper bourgeoisie and princely office-holding had always been closely linked.

In Italy and northern Europe alike, many leading families of the cities originated as domain officials of the cathedral chapter or the prince who was the town lord. Not surprisingly, landownership in both the city and its rural environs was

the most significant component of the ‘portfolio’ of these people, a development that was considerably accelerated from the late thirteenth century. Pirenne’s idea that the urban patriciates were composed mainly of long-distance merchants has been revised in favour of the notion associated with Werner Sombart that the basis of their wealth was often in rents and finance. The early urban patricians lived from the profits of their rents, which were increasing considerably in the twelfth century as heavy immigration into the cities intensified demand for land and housing. In both Italy and the north, only in the thirteenth century did a clear demarcation emerge between the old landowning families, which by then were branching into merchandising, and a newer elite of purely merchant origins.²⁰

The production of goods and delivery of services grew substantially during the early twelfth century, but particularly after the 1160s. As the rural economy expanded and diversified, and as some urban industry developed, town populations grew considerably faster relatively than the farming sector until the late thirteenth century. Just as the demographic base for massive urbanisation was being established, the supply of bullion in the European economy was increased tremendously, as new silver mines were discovered and exploited, and as Italian control of the Mediterranean carrying trade and exports of grain to Africa brought gold into Europe. The amount of coin in circulation in England increased almost ninefold between 1180 and 1310, a period when population may at most have tripled.²¹ Larger denominations of silver coin were minted, and gold coins were introduced, facilitating interregional trade, while lesser coins for the first time were used to a significant degree for small consumer items and for wages, both of which contributed to occupational diversification within the city. It was now more feasible to bring small quantities of both raw materials and manufactured goods to market than in an earlier period when barter played a significant role in exchange. The use of money for wages for the first time made possible the service occupations that are so characteristic of the urban economy and also facilitated industrial specialisation, for example in the textile industry, where the labour of many persons went into the making of the finished, marketable product.²²

Urban life in the centuries covered by this book, a period that bridges the traditional notion of ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’, was thus primarily market oriented. Trade was more important for most towns than industry, and the cities functioned more as centres of demand than of commodity production. They had a high level of occupational and functional differentiation and a mobile population. Finally, the cities had good communications, often at the intersection of a land route and a river, and had intimate links with the economies, social structures and rulers of their rural environs.

Colonialism, Foundation of Settlements and Urbanisation

In the age of seigniorial urbanisation, a city was a place with a fortified inner core, with or without suburbs, and the site of a bishopric or at least several

parish churches, or a monastery. In terms of their functions, all other settlements, even those with markets, were agrarian villages.

But the late eleventh century brings us for the first time against a problem of defining 'urban'. Most historians trained in the German tradition consider any settlement to be a town if it had a market or a charter that distinguished it legally from its environs. In Germany some three thousand 'towns' were founded in the thirteenth century alone, and virtually all of them always remained small. Since they had privileges that other places did not, they were technically 'urban' settlements. English, American and Belgian scholars, by contrast, tend to use modern economic criteria, but they often take the presence of any non-agricultural occupation as a sign of urbanisation. Yet, while we cannot deny that the 'dwarf towns' had some urban characteristics, usually the right to hold a weekly market and a slightly more differentiated workforce than purely farm villages, lumping Milan and Saltash together as 'urban' creates a category that is too broad to be a useful analytical tool. Whether a region has a low or high urban index thus hinges on how far down the demographic scale one defines 'urban'.

The human landscape was transformed in the two centuries after 1100 by the foundation of thousands of new 'towns', and even more by the physical expansion of existing settlements. The establishment of new towns in the interior of Europe accompanied the reclamation and colonisation of new agricultural land and the military occupation of territory. Lords began giving liberties to places that they were founding or to already existing small settlements whose growth they hoped to encourage. These 'elementary liberties of the bourg' typically gave to the 'burgesses' privileges that included freedom from toll, the right to hold a market, fixed ground rents and the right to justice in the locality, before the lord's representative if no separate town court existed. Most medieval planned towns were established along trade routes. The junction of a river and a road was especially favourable. Some of the new foundations had a glorious future. Ypres, founded in 1066, was already one of the great cities of Flanders by the early twelfth century. The most famous town plantation is Lübeck, re-founded in 1159 and endowed with its own law and government by Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony. Lübeck became one of the great ports of medieval Europe and a leading town of the German Hanse, the league of north German cities. Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Salisbury are obvious examples of the very different directions that such foundations could take: the former became one of the great ports of England, while the latter simply replaced the existing city of the bishop of Salisbury, Old Sarum, which had only ten inhabitants over age 16 in 1377.²³

Urban foundations, particularly those that received fortifications, were an important means by which newcomers could gain legal and defensive footholds in areas where they were an unwanted minority. The Norman conquerors established French settlements in England, in some cases adjacent to an older Anglo-Saxon town. A century later their Angevin successors were founding English towns in Ireland. In the Iberian peninsula, as the Muslims were pushed southward, towns founded by the conquering Christians became cultural and military outposts. In Gascony the English and French established small 'bastides' as

population centres and strongholds. Edward I's Welsh bastides from the 1280s were settled largely by foreigners to keep the natives in check, as was also true of the German plantations east of the Elbe. The English conquerors frankly admitted that civilising the natives by Anglicising them was the intent of town plantation in Wales. After the Welsh revolt of 1295 the Welsh were forbidden to live in English boroughs such as Caernarfon and Conwy. The French bastides, by contrast, were also intended as farm markets and were not completely new settlements, for they often simply regrouped people who lived in the area.²⁴

Into the late Middle Ages, and in some cases beyond, Germans were the economic and political elite of colonial east European towns whose populations were mainly Slavic. Although some major Polish towns originated on cult sites or strongholds, genuine urban life was introduced by the bishoprics of the German missionaries, followed by their merchant settlements that brought a German town law, generally that of Lübeck or Magdeburg. The towns founded by the Teutonic Knights, starting with Chelmno and Torun in 1233, are an eastern parallel to the Welsh and French bastides. They were strongly fortified, but traders also moved east, usually attaching themselves to existing Slavic settlements and often establishing a German quarter in them. Although most plantations in the west did not become major cities, this is not true in the east: Berlin and Dresden are really post-medieval in their urban development, but Wrocław, Poznań, Gdansk, Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, Rostock and Stettin had all become major cities by 1400.²⁵

But these are atypical cases. The conditions that bring a settlement into existence are not necessarily the same as those that will foster growth, and planned and planted towns (which are not always the same thing) developed in an already partly – and in some regions densely – urbanised landscape. Towns that had ancient antecedents had a tremendous advantage. All but five of the 24 greater English provincial towns of the late Middle Ages had walls, and ten of the remaining 19 had Roman walls. All but five had a castle. All but nine were significant before 1066, and all but eight were the site of a bishopric at some time. Domesday Book mentioned 15 as boroughs in 1086.²⁶ Few places founded after 1200 west of the Elbe evolved into cities, and most of them were patterned on existing towns, topographically, or in their law, or both. The impact of town plantations on the urban network in the west was thus minimal, unless one defines 'urban' very broadly. The German/Slavic East is another matter. While in the early thirteenth century virtually all German towns, even by the extended definition, were west of the Elbe, by 1400 there were about 1500 west and 1500 east of that natural frontier. This, however, involves the establishment of numerous small towns in the older settled parts of Germany, as well as eastern colonisation. Southern Germany, in particular, has numerous small towns, the result of lords founding too many settlements for many of them to be successful.²⁷

This is not to say that the new towns had no significant functions in the commercial life of Europe. Transportation of goods was much slower and more dangerous than now. If the small towns were only four or five hours apart by foot or pack animal, as was often true in Germany and England, they served not only as

markets of their own environs, but also as overnight or relay stations between the major central places. In addition to territorial lords, some large cities founded towns. Florence established two, Scarperia and Firenzuola, on opposite slopes of the Apennines on the road between Florence and Bologna. They served as defensive outposts against magnates who were hostile to the city, and most merchants en route between Florence and Bologna, a distance of 110 km, stopped overnight at one or both of them.²⁸

From Medieval to Modern Urbanisation

By 1300 the urban map of Europe was virtually complete except for the great political capitals that would develop in the early modern period. As population growth in the towns outstripped that of rural Europe, a place of 5000 souls in 1100 occupied roughly the same rank in the urban hierarchy as one of 20,000 in 1300. Paris was the largest city of Europe, with a population of some 200,000 in the early fourteenth century, but it was the only metropolis of France. Montpellier, Rouen, Toulouse and Tours had between 30,000 and 40,000 souls. The next largest cities in the north after Paris were London and Ghent, each at about 80,000, followed by Cologne at about 50,000. Bruges, only 40 km from Ghent, probably had some 50,000 persons. In the Mediterranean, Granada was the largest city of Muslim Spain, with a population of over 100,000, while Seville, at about 80,000, Barcelona at 50,000, and the religious capital of Toledo at 40,000 were the largest Christian communities. Northern Italy had a large concentration of cities, with Venice, Genoa and Milan having populations of between 100,000 and 150,000. The interior cities of Tuscany were a second tier, with Florence and Siena between 50,000 and 95,000.

These populations, however, were high points until the modern period. Europe experienced severe economic dislocation and political disorder in the late Middle Ages. After peaking in the 1290s, the foundation of new towns virtually stopped until the early modern period. The established cities also underwent massive shocks in the half-century between 1275 and 1325. Most of them had absorbed more immigrants during the population expansion of the central Middle Ages than could be supported by existing jobs and markets. Although Italian merchants were making direct voyages to the North Sea ports after 1277, a development that would revolutionise commercial relations in the long term, the economic impact of this change was only slowly felt. Problems of unemployment loomed, and poverty began to be a serious problem for city officials. Occupational guilds that were named for crafts had developed in many cities, and during this period some of them, particularly those that were controlled by an oligarchy of merchants, began demanding the right to seats on town councils; we will explore these developments more fully in Chapters 4 and 5.

Often conditions that originated in the rural areas spilled over into the cities. Family feuds, sometimes involving a political alliance but sometimes

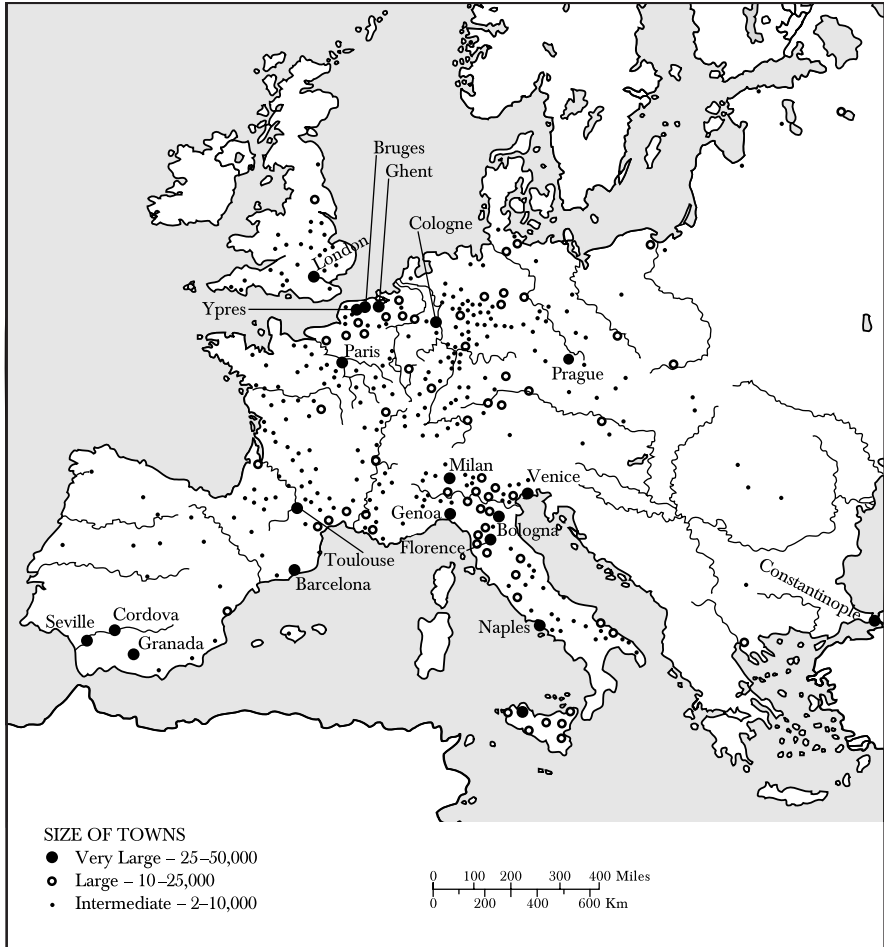


Figure 1.2 The distribution of the larger towns of Europe, *c.* 1300

not, paralysed many larger cities. The Italian towns were racked by vendettas between family-based factions favouring the territorial aspirations of the Holy Roman Emperor (the Ghibellines) and those preferring the closer but less effectual pope (the Guelfs). There were fundamental shifts of power. During the thirteenth century Florence mastered its environs and became the economic centre of Tuscany, replacing Pisa, which it would eventually annex. The feuds of the Colom and Soler factions impeded Bordeaux between the late 1240s and early 1330s and even defied efforts of the French and English kings to pacify the city. The elites of the Flemish cities were divided into Leliaert and Clauwaert parties, respectively favouring accommodation with the French crown and relative independence under the count of Flanders.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed virtually constant war and dynastic turmoil that disrupted trade. During the 'Hundred Years War' between England and France, the suburbs of many cities were destroyed and their populations forced inside the walls, where they were often joined by refugees. More importantly from a structural perspective, bad harvests in the early fourteenth century led to a famine in 1315 that decimated the population of the major north European cities. A series of plagues began in 1348 with the 'Great Death' and continued with considerable intensity until 1400, then with diminishing frequency thereafter until the late seventeenth century. Overall population losses from famine and particularly plague seem to have been in the nature of 40 per cent by 1375. But death rates were much higher in the cities, given their congested conditions and the ease with which infection could spread, than in the rural areas.

The demographic and commercial realignments of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had a profound impact on urban Europe. Overall loss of population in the major cities of northern Europe was probably about half, but in Italy closer to two-thirds. Political and social conflict, particularly in cities with large industrial populations such as Ghent and Florence and in devastated political capitals such as Paris, also depressed population through violent death and exile. Paris, indeed, may have been the worst case of depopulation among the major cities of Europe, going from nearly a quarter of a million in 1328 to about 30,000 in the 1430s, although it recovered rapidly after the French regained the city from the English in 1437. The countryside was less affected by plague than the cities, but suffered worse damage from marauding troops. There was some recovery in parts of northern Europe during the fifteenth century, but total population only regained its 1300 levels around 1600.

Towns are living organisms that must adapt to changes over which they have no control or decline. The defensive functions of most towns had become less important by 1500 than earlier, and certainly were not as paramount as they had been in the period of urban origins. Service functions, including government, were increasingly important, and the cities continued to be religious capitals after the Protestant movement, as they had before. The most important consideration for the growth of towns in the modern period, as earlier, continued to be the diversity of functions that they could fulfil. Towns that had only a single dominant function, such as defence, declined.

General trends conceal a host of variables. While it was only after the end of the Hundred Years War that most continental towns recovered from the catastrophes, several English towns grew in the half-century after 1375, only to decline thereafter into the sixteenth century. Since war devastation cannot explain this for England, structural considerations are obviously at work. Given that the English economy was growing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the correlation that is often made between general economic growth and urban expansion works no better for developed England than for the German-Slavic east. Much of the stagnation was due to the diversion toward London of what had been the exporting trades of the provincial towns. Although London was

only manufacturing a small portion of the cloth that was exported from England, 93 per cent of the total customs value on cloth export in 1559 was collected at the port of London.²⁹

In 1500 there were 30 fewer cities with a population of over 10,000 than there had been in 1300, due to population losses, some concentration of settlement and mortality from plague, which was higher in the cities than in the rural areas.³⁰ Yet Europe had a higher urban density by 1600 than in 1300, and this requires some explanation. First, roughly a third of the expansion of the urban sector in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came from the growth of national and regional capitals. London was the largest city in western Europe by 1700, nearly 20 times the size of the next largest English city, while Paris surpassed the next largest French city, Lyon, by five times. Many older cities stagnated or declined.³¹

After the plagues, heavy immigration into the towns from their economically depressed rural environs meant that in the long term the cities recovered in percentage terms more of their plague losses than the rural areas did. Several explanations contribute to this. First, rural families tended to be larger than urban and thus had more trouble supporting all their members. Second, particularly after 1375, a cycle developed of low grain prices and high labour costs, and the presence of cheap food in the cities attracted people to them.

Overall standards of living were rising after the plagues. Although rural depopulation meant that the demand for urban manufactures would decline in quantitative terms, the growing prosperity of princes and the urban wealthy stimulated demand for luxuries that were the great cities' specialities. A more serious problem was the mutability of long-distance trade, which was conditioned not only by demand for town manufactures and the locally produced raw materials that were exported through the cities, but also by war disorders.³² Thus population declined and the standard of living for most city-dwellers rose in the late Middle Ages, due in large part to low grain prices. But this situation was reversed in the sixteenth century, as population grew and the standard of living, based on the movement of real wages (the purchasing power of a given wage measured against the prices of staple goods), declined by some 50 per cent.³³

The fortunes of war and changes in demography and patterns of demand made possible a new prosperity for cities and regions that had remained largely outside the broader currents of interregional trade until the late Middle Ages. The Hanse league of cities continued to dominate the long-distance trade of northern Germany, although this was rarely translated into power over the countryside. In the fifteenth century the cities of Upper (Southern) Germany – Nuremberg, Augsburg, Ravensburg and Ulm – became major centres of commercial capitalism and banking and of newly developing industries, especially printing. They controlled their environs politically to an extent that was unusual among the older German cities. Nuremberg gained a 'staple' or monopoly on goods passing on the roads that intersected its territory, then expanded this into a general regional hegemony, most exceptionally for a north European city. Nuremberg and to a lesser extent Cologne controlled the overland trade over the Brenner Pass to

Venice. Nuremberg investment capital promoted an increase in mining in the Balkans, and the metals and other raw materials of Bohemia and Hungary passed through Nuremberg en route to western markets, as did the western trade into these areas. Nurembergers were also active in the Baltic trade, at the international markets of Bruges, at the fairs of Frankfurt-am-Main and at the Low Country fairs of Antwerp and Bergen-op-Zoom.

The south German cities also transmitted manufactured goods of southeastern Europe westward, and they provided an overland route for Mediterranean goods. This led to a major reorientation of trade patterns in the northwest. From southern Germany, and from the newly important fairs of Geneva and Lyon, goods were shipped by overland routes to the Rhine and thence to Antwerp, which began its rise to preeminence in the fifteenth century. While the Italian galleys continued to visit Bruges, the artificiality of the Flemish city's commercial dominance became painfully apparent. When the Portuguese established their staple on colonial pepper at Antwerp in 1501, the transition was complete.³⁴

The late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also saw the growth of the cities of the southern and western Iberian peninsula, notably Seville, Cadiz and Lisbon. Barcelona, on the eastern coast, was one of the great cities of the early fourteenth century. Italian competition hurt its Mediterranean trade, but the development of a native textile industry prevented a complete collapse. The Castilian ports developed as depots for colonial voyages and trade with the Atlantic islands and Africa, although none of them developed a significant group of native merchants; capital for the colonial ventures was provided by foreigners, particularly Genoese.

Demographic Perspectives on the Early Modern Urban Network

Despite the depopulations of the late Middle Ages, western Europe was thus a much more urbanised place in the early sixteenth century than it had been around 1100. Although there were still clusters of large cities in northern Italy, northern France and the Low Countries, the spatial distribution of the large towns had become more uniform except in Britain and Scandinavia, as smaller centres took form alongside the old metropolitan cities, in some cases providing significant competition to them.

Around 1500 Europe had 154 places of 10,000 or more inhabitants, and four (Paris, Milan, Venice and Naples) of 100,000 or more. Of the 154, 44 were in Italy, another 44 in France and Belgium (using modern borders). This number had grown to 173 by 1550, with the most significant gains coming in Germany and Spain. No general region suffered major losses, and the strongest gains were in central Europe and the Mediterranean. Growth was much more rapid in the second half of the century, with a total of 220 places over 10,000 by 1600. The most notable increases were in Belgium (despite the religious wars), the Netherlands, France, northern Italy and Spain. This pattern was reversed in the first half of the seventeenth century, with the Dutch and French cities growing

rapidly, while the Mediterranean declined sharply and central Europe less drastically. Urban population as a percentage of total population was 31.7 by 1650. England, starting with a lower base than the Low Countries and Italy, rose from 5.8 per cent urban in 1600 to 8.8 per cent in 1650. Although the total number of places over 10,000 declined between 1600 and 1650, the total numbers of persons living in cities still rose.³⁵

The paradox in the previous sentence is explained by the fact that population was concentrating in the largest cities, while the smaller ones stagnated. The percentage of Europeans living in cities of at least 10,000 souls rose from 5.6 in 1500 to 9.2 in 1700. But when we make 40,000 the lower limit of what we call a 'city', the figure changes to a growth from a miniscule 1.9 per cent in 1500 to 5.2 per cent in 1700. Growth was most rapid in the larger cities, followed by those of medium size; while if 'city' is taken without a demographic qualifier, the total increase is least marked.³⁶

Only fragmentary population data survive for the pre-modern cities, and virtually all require considerable imagination on the demographer's part to be useful. Figure 1.3 summarises the current consensus for individual large cities. John Marshall has also compiled a useful table showing the changing relative size of 60 cities and towns, although he omits such notable places as Cologne and Nuremberg. Among the cities included in Marshall's list, London was the 24th largest in 1500, fourth in 1600 and first after Constantinople in 1700. Paris was eighth in 1500, third in 1600 and second in 1700. Naples was second in 1500 and 1600, fourth in 1700. Moscow rose from 44th in 1500 to ninth in 1700. Lisbon and Prague and Florence shared the twelfth position in 1500; but Lisbon rose to fifth in 1700, while Florence dropped to 21st in 1600 and 23rd in 1700. Vienna is a spectacular case: although the political capital of Habsburg Austria, it was only the 32nd largest city of Europe in 1500 and dropped further to 72nd in 1600 with the Turkish wars, but it rose to 13th place in 1700. Amsterdam was a small place as late as 1500 but rose to 38th place by 1600, then experienced a spectacular growth to sixth place by 1700. Madrid mushroomed as a political capital at the expense of Toledo, to 18th place in 1600 and 12th in 1700. Venice and Milan declined relatively, but they were still in the top score of cities in 1700. Hamburg rose dramatically, while Lyon declined: in the former case from 78th place in 1500 to 21st in 1700, in the latter from eighth in 1500 to 19th in 1700. Seville grew from 24th in 1500 to seventh in 1600, due to its privileges in the colonial trade granted by the Castilian crown; but with the decline of the colonies, it dropped to sixteenth in 1700. Rotterdam, Stockholm, Warsaw and Liverpool all grew significantly in the seventeenth century, in Liverpool's case at the expense of Chester, as the silting of the Dee estuary made access to the older centre difficult, while Manchester and Birmingham were mainly creatures of the eighteenth.³⁷

These figures show the considerable decline of many of the great medieval centres in the early modern period, although some of them recovered after the religious wars, particularly those of the southern Low Countries: despite being the *de facto* capital of the Burgundian/Spanish Netherlands, Brussels was only

I. Italy

	<i>c. 1300</i>	<i>c. 1400</i>	<i>c. 1500</i>	<i>c. 1550</i>	<i>c. 1600</i>	<i>c. 1650</i>	<i>c. 1700</i>
Bologna	40	25	55	55	63	58	63
Brescia	45	25	50	40	50	40	35
Cremona	40			37	40	17	
Florence	90	35	70	60	80	70	80
Genoa	100	60			63	70	
Milan	100		100	50	110	95	100
Naples	40			210	250		215
Padua	30		27	32	35	25	
Palermo	60	40	50	80	100		100
Rome	40	40	50	45	110	126	135
Turin		4		14	20		42
Venice	120		115	160	150	120	140
Verona	40	20	40	46	55	25	

II. Holy Roman Empire

	<i>c. 1300</i>	<i>c. 1400</i>	<i>c. 1500</i>	<i>c. 1550</i>	<i>c. 1600</i>	<i>c. 1650</i>	<i>c. 1700</i>
Cologne	80	30	40	35			
Frankfurt		10			25	15	25
Gdąnsk			30		40	100	
Hamburg	5	10	20		20	50	
Leipzig				7	15	15	22
Lübeck	25	30	30				31
Nuremberg		20	50				
Prague		40	30				
Vienna			20		60		

III. France

	<i>c. 1300</i>	<i>c. 1400</i>	<i>c. 1500</i>	<i>c. 1550</i>	<i>c. 1600</i>	<i>c. 1650</i>	<i>c. 1700</i>
Lyon		15	40	70			90
Paris	200	100		250	250		300
Rouen	40	20		75	80		65
Toulouse		23	35	50		42	43

Figure 1.3 European urban populations (in thousands)

the 52nd largest city of Europe in 1500, but it had grown to 21st by 1700. Antwerp's population shrank from a high of 100,000 around 1565 to 42,000 after the blockade of the Scheldt in 1585, but it revived in the early seventeenth

IV. Low Countries

	<i>c. 1300</i>	<i>c. 1400</i>	<i>c. 1500</i>	<i>c. 1550</i>	<i>c. 1600</i>	<i>c. 1650</i>	<i>c. 1700</i>
Amsterdam			15	35	100	135	180
Antwerp			40	100		57	
Bruges	50	35	30	35		34	
Brussels			37		50		60
Ghent	80	40	40	45	30		40
Liège						50	55

V. England

	<i>c. 1300</i>	<i>c. 1400</i>	<i>c. 1500</i>	<i>c. 1550</i>	<i>c. 1600</i>	<i>c. 1650</i>	<i>c. 1700</i>
Bristol			10				20
London	80	35	70	80	250	400	500
Norwich			13		13		30

VI. Spain

	<i>c. 1300</i>	<i>c. 1400</i>	<i>c. 1500</i>	<i>c. 1550</i>	<i>c. 1600</i>	<i>c. 1650</i>	<i>c. 1700</i>
Barcelona						64	
Madrid					65	75	120
Seville				100	150	125	

Figure 1.3 (*continued*)

century. Ghent declined from eighth largest in 1500 to 36th in 1700. The case of Lübeck is indicative. Its commercial privileges had virtually ended by 1600 with increased competition from the English and Dutch in the Baltic trade. Lübeck's population was around 31,000 in 1650, which was probably about its fourteenth-century size; but this made it a secondary city in the urban framework of the seventeenth century.³⁸

The highest relative growth through 1700 was in two types of city. The first comprised political capitals: Copenhagen, Madrid, Moscow and Paris in the sixteenth century, and Lisbon, Stockholm and Vienna in the seventeenth; London's situation as a political capital contributed to its growth but was not its fundamental cause. Ports made up the second group: Amsterdam, Cadiz, Hamburg, Oporto, Lisbon and Rotterdam, all of which had colonial involvements, and Bordeaux, Marseille, Nantes, Bristol, Glasgow and Liverpool. All of these except Marseille were Atlantic or North Sea ports, showing the shift of commercial pre-eminence away from the Mediterranean. Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Lisbon and London were both ports and political capitals. Not until the eighteenth century

would a third category of towns, manufacturing centres, begin to experience a significant relative growth. Even then it remained the smallest group of the three, and until after 1800 rapidly growing manufacturing cities were found only in the British Isles.³⁹

The cities of the Holy Roman Empire illustrate regional mutations behind the total population figures. In contrast to the western monarchies, the decentralised Empire did not have a capital. Vienna developed later, and it was too geographically peripheral to become a German capital when it did. In purely demographic terms there was little change in the rank order of the cities of the Empire between 1500 and about 1630: Cologne, Nuremberg, Gdąnsk, Augsburg, Prague and Lübeck – all of them commercial centres except Prague – remained the largest. The great changes after 1630 are associated with the rise of political capitals. There were also changes in regional distribution. As late as 1600 the most urbanised part of Germany was within the old Roman frontier in the south and west, but thereafter this region declined in favour of the towns of the north and east, particularly the local administrative centres of the interior, which grew as some of the ports declined. The German urban network was polycentric, with a large number of medium-sized towns of comparable populations, which served as centres of regions that were largely autonomous. The greatest growth occurred at Hamburg, Königsberg, Breslau, Frankfurt and Leipzig, which slightly more than doubled in size. But the political capitals, Vienna, Berlin and Dresden, grew even more rapidly; while Leipzig, the economic centre of Saxony, doubled in size between 1500 and 1700, the princely residence of Dresden quadrupled, an evolution that left the two Saxon towns of comparable size (*c.* 15,000) at the end of our period. The growing political domination of Prussia and Austria led to the rise of Berlin and Vienna, but it did not do violence to local networks.⁴⁰

The great Italian cities were once thought to have lost much of their trade after the Turkish capture of Constantinople in 1453, which disrupted their eastern sources of supply, but this has been exaggerated. The definitive loss for Italy and its cities only occurs in the seventeenth century, and particularly after 1630, as they lost their monopoly of shipping in the Mediterranean to the English and Dutch and as their highly priced luxury manufactures were supplanted by cheaper competitors from the north. Five of the eight cities of Europe with populations of over 100,000 in 1600 – Venice, Palermo, Messina, Naples and Rome – were in Italy or Sicily. Venice and Genoa continued to dominate Mediterranean trade, and Genoese bankers financed much more of Spain's colonial endeavour than did native Castilians. Florence was still important for banking and its textile industry, but its population was truncated. The other Mediterranean cities remained large, but they were becoming more consumer cities on the ancient model as they lost banking and industrial functions. Italy had a high urban index but was not prosperous. The fact that there were so many large cities, with rentiers residing in them while living off the income of their peasant tenants, depressed Italy still further. The positive correlation between economic growth and urbanisation, which as we have seen does not always work for northern Europe, had also become inverse in the Mediterranean basin by 1650.⁴¹

The Early Eighteenth Century: The Transition to Industrial Urbanisation

Except for the heavily industrialised cities, the modern urban map of Europe was thus established between 1100 and 1700. Market networks with pre-existing cities as their nodal points had been superimposed on the locally-based cult and princely centres of the early Middle Ages. These cities had some industry, most of it based on satisfaction of basic consumer needs of the local market. Europe had also developed some exportable manufactured goods, particularly textiles, most of which were either made or at least finished in the cities or financed with urban capital.

No fundamental change occurs suddenly, and antecedents of the modern factory system developed before the Industrial Revolution. An important distinction between industrial production before and after about 1700 is that, given the prevalence of putting-out and of household production (see Chapter 2), few medieval industries had large fixed capital. Although city governments fostered competition, it was not unbridled, and the cities regulated strategic goods. Mills were too expensive for individual millers and were often taken over by town governments. By the sixteenth century in England, workshops for coarse cloth working amounted to small factories, with numerous persons in a single small room. Factories for armaments, which did require a substantial capital outlay, are found in early modern France, northern Italy and the Low Countries. Several German cities had factories in the sixteenth century, usually with privileges given by the city government. Huguenot exiles established a factory for silks and brocades at Zürich; in 1592 a brocade factory was established at Antwerp, and a soap factory at Nuremberg in 1593. In places that had shipyards, the city government usually owned them and leased them to guilds or to syndicates for actual operation.⁴²

Apart from printing and metalworking, there were few fundamental changes in industrial technology before the Industrial Revolution. Some changes were made to the spinning wheel, and the gig-mill was now used in cloth finishing. There were improvements in bellows and furnaces, especially the development of the blast furnace. Better pumps and ventilation systems made it possible to dig deeper mining shafts. But most of this occurred outside the towns; even their iron-workers finished iron and other metals that had been smelted outside the town. Thus the major improvements were in the organisation of industry, particularly the increasing direction of industry by merchant capitalists through the putting-out system. Woollens, the staple of the greatest industrial cities of the Middle Ages, were largely urban this late only in Spain, except for the highly skilled finishing processes. Even the prosperous English export textile trade was in unfinished cloth, which was dyed at Antwerp.⁴³

The technology that created the breakthrough to the second Industrial Revolution established a new set of circumstances that changed the pattern of urbanisation, which previously had been primarily commercial but now became mainly industrial, and brought with it the rise in the eighteenth century of such places as

Roubaix, Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. In this chapter we have indicated the most important cities and trends at work in the period of incipient urbanisation. But the rise and decline of cities was determined by a complex and evolving interaction of circumstances and characteristics. To those issues we now turn.

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