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Introduction

The medieval England whose towns I am considering had virtually the same boundaries as those of contemporary England. The same is true of France, with one major exception. The county of Flanders was a fief of the French monarchy, though, as in the case of many other counties and duchies, by no means dominated by the Capetians or the Valois. Most of the county of Flanders is in modern Belgium. Some of the most important towns of medieval Europe were contained within it – Ghent, Ypres, Bruges, as well as many smaller urban centres. The Flemish towns were commercially and industrially to the forefront of the economic, social and political development of northern Europe, especially in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As historians such as J. Lestocquoy have shown, they are most appropriately compared with the towns of northern Italy.[1] I have therefore taken the view that they were not characteristic of French urban development. In spite of the wealth of primary and secondary material on them, I have not included them in my comparative study.

On the other hand, Provence was not part of the medieval French kingdom until the end of the fifteenth century. Unlike Flanders, however, it was similar in economy and social structure to an important French region – Languedoc – and contained urban centres which have been well studied by French historians. I have therefore included it in my comparative study.

My coverage, even given these omissions and inclusions, cannot be claimed to be complete. I have read as much on French towns as – so far – possible, and also on English towns. I will certainly have to continue. However, given the fact that I am considering a specific

[1] *Les villes de Flandre et d'Italie sous le gouvernement des patriciens (XIe–XVe siècles).*

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theme, as well as attempting a comparative perspective, I may perhaps be forgiven some omissions.

ENGLAND AND FRANCE: A USEFUL COMPARISON?

The value of comparative historical studies has been accepted in principle for many years. The same phenomena studied in different countries are often quite differently documented, so that the better evidence for one country will help to understand similar features in another country or countries. For example, the agrarian history of medieval England is much better documented than that of most other European countries, and if used with care may throw light on problems elsewhere than in England. France and England are sufficiently close and yet sufficiently different to make comparisons worthwhile, as Marc Bloch showed in his Sorbonne lectures, published after his death under the title *Seigneurie française et manoir anglais*.[2]

Marc Bloch began his lectures by drawing attention to the contrast in his day – that is in the 1930s – between the enclosed countryside of England and the open fields of northern France, between the advanced capitalist farming of England and the still predominantly peasant agriculture of France. He sought for the origins of this contrast as far back as the middle ages. As far as English and French urbanism is concerned, I do not intend to have a similarly contemporary starting point. If I have in mind a perception of a significant and historically conditioned divergence, it goes back rather to the early modern period when England embarked, more quickly than France, on the road to capitalism. France, as Fernand Braudel insisted in his *Identité de la France*, was then backward economically, in spite of its size, wealth and political power.[3] It is not that I am suggesting that it was simply a contrast in urban developments which produced these divergent economic and social histories, but that an exploration of comparable urban histories in the two countries may well throw light, not merely on post-medieval developments, but on the problems concerning the way in which the towns fitted into feudal societies.

France and England in the middle ages were different from each other, but not too different to be usefully comparable. In spite of the

[2] Paris, 1960. [3] Vol. II.

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destructive wars waged by England on French soil in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the two countries had intermeshed socially and politically for hundreds of years. For example, it is clear that there had been close commercial relationships between the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish states. This was strikingly illustrated by the famous correspondence at the end of the eighth century between Offa, king of Mercia, and Charlemagne, in which the latter complained about the length of woollen cloaks imported from England.[4] Contacts other than commercial must have been even earlier. The Anglo-Saxon missionaries in the seventh and eighth centuries not only had a considerable impact on the pagan Germans but also exercised influence throughout the Frankish kingdom. The Venerable Bede, a Northumberland monk, was sufficiently well known beyond the boundaries of the Northumbrian kingdom, for his *Ecclesiastical History* (*c*. 731) to establish a chronological system which was adopted throughout western Europe. And, as is well known, the Northumbrian scholar, Alcuin, was an important member of the circle of intellectuals at Charlemagne's court, beyond which his influence spread when he became abbot of the monastery of St Martin at Tours. The English Channel was no barrier to Anglo-Frankish/French relations – including those with Normandy, which, though leading to conflict in 1066, must have been close.[5]

This Norman conquest of 1066 had obvious and long-lasting consequences. The English aristocracy was largely replaced by the Normans and their various allies, so that for nearly four centuries the English ruling class was as much francophone as anglophone. The Norman and Angevin kings were lords of Normandy and of much of western France until the early thirteenth century, and then, although losing Normandy, Anjou and Poitou, controlled Gascony until the middle of the fifteenth century. The Anglo-Norman language continued to be the language of the English law courts throughout the middle ages. English barons and knights were involved, along with their Norman, Angevin and Gascon counterparts, in the administration of the French lands of the kings of England.

[4] F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 20.
[5] See D. Wormald, 'The Age of Offa and Alfred' and 'The Ninth Century' in J. Campbell, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons*; and H.R. Loyn, 'The Overseas Trade of Anglo-Saxon England' in *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest*.

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There were, of course, sharp contrasts. Although Normandy, Brittany, Picardy and the Ile de France were very similar geographically to lowland England, Mediterranean France, and indeed most parts of France where the *langue d'oc* was spoken, were very different.

The size of France and of its population also contrasts with that of England, but this also means that for our purposes more comparative material is available. The French population in the thirteenth century may have been three times that of England. In 1316, 227 *bonnes villes* of France were represented in an assembly summoned by the king, whereas the analogous urban representation in the English parliaments at about the same time was between eighty and ninety towns.[6]

The great number of towns within the boundaries of modern France has provided French historians with a fine opportunity to develop the study of medieval urban history. There are not only many monographs dealing with individual towns, but studies of urban development in regions such as Brittany, Languedoc and Provence. To these may be added many studies of specific features of urban development such as Petit-Dutaillis' history of the communal movement, or Coornaert's study of the gilds. Nor are large, up-to-date syntheses lacking, such as the *Histoire de la France urbaine* edited by G. Duby.[7] This abundance contrasts with the lesser attention given to medieval urbanism by English historians, at any rate in the inter-war period. There were some innovative writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Alice Stopford Green, whose *Town Life in the Fifteenth Century* was broader than the title implies. James Tait's *Medieval English Boroughs* and George Unwin's *Gilds and Companies of London* were also works whose value remains.[8] More recent generalisers about the medieval English town have not always matched the achievements of their predecessors, though Susan Reynolds' *Introduction to the*

[6] B. Chevalier in the index to *Les bonnes villes de France aux XIVe et XVe siècles*, lists the 240 French towns; the English towns represented varied very much in numbers. The figure mentioned was normal, but 'at one time or another', between 1294 and 1337, as many as 140 towns might have had to send representatives – T.F.T. Plucknett, 'Parliament 1327–36' in E.B. Fryde and E. Miller, eds., *Historical Studies of the English Parliament*, I, p. 217.

[7] E. Coornaert, *Les corporations en France avant 1789*; C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Les communes Française. Caractères et évolution des origines du XVIIIe siècle*; G. Duby, ed., *Histoire de la France urbaine, II, La ville mediévale*.

[8] A.S. Green, 2 vols., London, 1894; J. Tait, Manchester, 1936; G. Unwin, London, 1908.

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History of Medieval English Towns provides good coverage of most of the themes of urban history.[9] There have also been a number of good studies of individual towns.

There are various reasons for the relative shortage of work on English medieval urban history (as compared with that for the early modern period), admirable though some of it has been, and continues, to be. One obvious reason is the relatively small number of English towns. The other is that, compared with the sources for agrarian history, those for medieval urban history are much less abundant. This may be one of the reasons why scholars with a general interest in the economic and social history of the middle ages tended to be attracted to the history of the estate and manor rather than to that of the town. Lords and peasants have received more attention than artisans and merchants. A comparison of English and French towns in the context of their respective feudal societies could certainly be of interest to English urban historians as well as to their French opposite numbers – and to any historians of the European middle ages.

[9] Oxford, 1977.

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1. *The town and feudalism: preliminary definitions*

A TOWN IS A TOWN WHEREVER IT IS?

What was a town? A preliminary definition, however general, may be useful. The definition need not attempt to cover all towns from antiquity to the twentieth century, but only those of medieval, feudal society. One of the problems is that even medieval towns varied greatly in size and function, from small market towns with even fewer than 1,000 inhabitants to great cities, like Paris, with more than 100,000. A useful definition may, then, be rather what was *not* a town than what was. In effect, the town has to be distinguished from its rural hinterland and not, as some historians have tended to do, to be assimilated into the agrarian economy and society.[1]

The first point to be made is that the town, great or small, was the location of permanent market activity, not only at a weekly chartered market, which the lords of many villages also obtained in the thirteenth century. Second, and this is crucial, the inhabitants of the town did not, in contrast to those of the village, produce their own means of subsistence, even though they might have small vegetable plots, vineyards or even meadows. Their main activity was devoted to manufacture and trade, from which the bulk of their income was derived. The essential feature of towns, large or small, was occupational heterogeneity in an economy which produced, bought and sold commodities other than those necessary for subsistence, that is, mainly agricultural products.

The existence of a permanent market and of occupational heterogeneity might seem to be sufficient to define the medieval town very broadly, but many historians would probably wish to add at

[1] Already criticised in 'Towns in English Feudal Society' reprinted in my *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*.

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least an institutional dimension. This usually included the possession by the town's inhabitants of certain basic liberties, without which their special function could not be properly fulfilled. They would at least need freedom of status and tenure, freedom of movement and freedom of access to the market. Even if it were argued that a settlement with a market and an occupationally heterogeneous population should be assumed to be a town, one would expect that the grant of at least elementary liberties usually followed the economic development implied by the first two conditions, and would provide an extra indicator of urban status.

The role of the town in medieval feudal society has been perceived in many different ways, over the years, both by historians and sociologists. Some sociologists, in particular, have been tempted to assimilate the medieval town, like medieval feudal society, into a generalised pre-industrial or 'traditional' era in human history. In their long term perspective of pre-industrial history, they have perceived a duality between town and country, from the ancient world onwards, and conceived 'the city' as an unchanged social essence whose economy, society and ethos were always and necessarily specific to a model of urbanism, whatever the overall social formation.

This concept of 'the city' as an entity independent of the context of the wider society is reflected in the views of Louis Wirth in his famous article, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life'.[2] Not all sociologists, of course, ignored the historical context. One has only to remember Max Weber's book on *The City*, a work with many illuminating perceptions of medieval urbanisation.[3] G. Sjoberg's *The Preindustrial City* emphasises the varying economic, social and political contexts of pre-industrial cities. Unfortunately, he over-generalises pre-industrial society. For him, the whole pre-industrial world is divided into 'folk' and 'feudal' social formations, defined in a manner unrecognisable by historians. His elaborate theorising, however much he preaches to those (especially historians) presumed to be ignorant, is of little use in dealing with real feudalism.[4]

On the whole, historians have been less all-embracing in their perception of the pre-industrial town. Nevertheless, there have been elements in their work which, to a greater or lesser extent, include the concept of the unchanging town:country duality. Even Fernand

[2] *American Journal of Sociology*, 44, 1938.
[3] Trans. D. Martindale and G. Neuworth. [4] New York, 1960.

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Braudel, in his *Capitalism and Material Life*, writes 'A town is a town wherever it is',[5] a statement sufficiently influential to be taken as the title of an introductory section of the collected papers printed in *The Pursuit of Urban History*.[6]

Henri Pirenne's theory concerning the revival of urbanisation in the early middle ages initiated a very influential interpretation of urban development which could also imply the city's identity, specific to itself, separate from the social formation within which it was contained. As is well known, he believed that true urbanisation in the medieval period began with the revival of long distance trade, which he supposed to have been ruptured in the Mediterranean as a result of the activities of the Moslems in the Carolingian era. Once this threat had disappeared, itinerant merchants dealing in (mainly) luxury commodities could settle down at suitable, and often fortified, places on international trade routes – and thus laid the basis for the growth of the great commercial centres of medieval Europe.[7] Fruitful though much of Pirenne's work on medieval towns has been, his version of early medieval urbanisation has been severely questioned, not only conceptually but empirically.[8] His critics have insisted that the de-urbanisation of the Roman Empire and the diminution of Mediterranean and European trade began long before the Arab conquests. And although a significant revival of international trade did occur in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, it was not the itinerant merchants who became the ruling bourgeoisie of the growing towns. As many historians, from Lestocquoy to Hibbert, have shown, these urban patriciates were mainly composed of local landowners and feudal officials, often from families of the lesser nobility.[9]

Pirenne's writing on urban history, unlike that of some of the theorists mentioned above, does, however, pose the critical question of the role of the bourgeoisie in feudal society. Did the bourgeoisie, whatever its origins, become an anti-feudal social force in the central period of the middle ages? In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in particular, a number of towns obtained elements of self-government, jurisdictional exemption from outside feudal courts, and facilities

[5] Trans. M. Kochan, p. 373. [6] D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe, eds., p. 3.
[7] See his *Medieval Cities: their Origins and the Rebirth of Trade*.
[8] See, for example, the articles collected in A.F. Havighurst, ed., *The Pirenne Thesis. Analysis, Criticism and Revision*.
[9] J. Lestocquoy, *Les dynasties bourgeoises d'Arras*; J. Hibbert, 'The Origins of the Medieval Town Patriciate'.

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for the admission of outside servile immigrants. I will consider the details of these privileged towns later, but the general issue is, of course, of considerable importance. If towns were 'non-feudal islands in the feudal seas',[10] and if their economic, social and political interests were in conflict with the interests of the feudal ruling class, then one would expect them to be a driving force in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, long distance generators of the bourgeois revolution. Such an interpretation of the urban role would also, of course, enforce the concept of a 'dual' society, in which the towns constituted an alien element within the social order of agrarian feudalism.

In fact, the concept of the separateness or antagonistic role of the medieval town within feudal society has now been much eroded. Standard texts on urban history are adjusting to a new standpoint, as in Hohenberg and Lees' *Making of Urban Europe 1000–1950*, in which they recognise that 'urban histories are inseparable from the histories of the economic, social and political systems of which they are part'.[11] However, the single-minded pursuit of urban history naturally involves a concentration of what seems to be specific to the town. For the historian of feudal society as a whole, what is needed is an examination not only of the role played by towns in feudal society, but of the extent to which the economic, social, political and ideological structures of feudalism are found in town as well as in the country.

WHAT WAS FEUDALISM?

We must, of course, recognise that there are different ideas about what is 'feudalism'. The traditional interpretation defines it in terms of the relationships between different strata of the landowning class. The determining features are the lord–vassal relationships, concretely manifested in the granting from on high of landed fiefs to clients, retainers and relatives, in return for homage, military service, aid and counsel.[12] Although this could imply a fairly tightly organised pyramidal structure, as was found in the Norman

[10] M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 212.
[11] Cambridge, Mass., 1985, pp. 2, 19.
[12] F.M. Stenton, *The First Century of English Feudalism, 1066 to 1166*, very well describes the feudo-vassalic aspect for England. For France, see F.L. Ganshof, *Feudalism*, trans. P. Grierson. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon, presents a more wide-ranging view.

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monarchy in post-conquest England, from the king down through the barons to the knights, the model usually implied a decentralisation of power. It was the private jurisdictions of barons, bishops, abbots and knights, with a concomitant fragmentation of power, which was seen as one of the chief characteristics of feudalism. The economic basis of landed estates worked by a subordinated peasantry was recognised, the peasants being seen as analogous at the bottom of the social heap, because of their dependence on their lords, to the knights or barons higher up the social scale. They were seen as the base of the pyramid of mutual duties and obligations.

This interpretation – or description – of medieval feudalism contains much that is demonstrably true. It also fits in with a perception of urbanism primarily defined in terms of a by-product of long-distance trade in luxury goods. Towns, in order to develop as trading centres, needed basic liberties of tenure and status which would allow their burgess populations to engage freely in buying and selling on the market. In order to avoid the interference and impositions of the feudal landlords, they needed, as we have said, to be as free as possible from seigneurial jurisdiction, to be justiciable in their own town court and, if possible, to be able to appeal to what could be regarded as 'public' rather than 'private' authority. The public authority was thought of, in terms of this particular interpretation of feudalism, as the monarchy. The ideal town, therefore, would be one ruled by its own burgesses, free from interference by feudal potentates and protected by the monarch or the nearest equivalent of public authority, such as the counts or dukes of major territories. Such an interpretation would seem to fit in well with the urban communal movements of the twelfth century. It is also an interpretation which assumes that the monarchy as public authority was non-feudal.

Our picture of towns in feudal society may be somewhat different if we define feudalism as a social formation within which the lord–vassal relationship, emphasised in the traditional interpretation, was certainly important, but without being determinant.[13] As a social formation, the first aspect of feudalism is the level of technology, which meant that the basic unit of production was small scale, the peasant holding based on the family labour force normally

[13] See my entry, 'Feudal Society' in T. Bottomore *et al.*, eds., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*.

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