Framing the Early Middle Ages Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800
[1. The problem of urbanism]

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There has been a great deal of disagreement over the nature of urban continuity into the early middle ages; this has both fruitful and unfruitful aspects. On the positive side, the urban debate has been the focus for much important work in the last couple of decades, and the steadily rising number of urban excavations has tended to be made use of unusually quickly to develop new versions of rival syntheses, with the league table of successful and unsuccessful towns subtly shifting each time; ten or so recent conferences have also contributed to establishing an effective international dimension to the debate. On the negative side, there is a frequent lack of agreement even over the object of debate, not to speak of the criteria that might be used to assess it. One issue, not in itself a negative one, is that historians and archaeologists alike (although they often disagree profoundly over whether documentary or archaeological criteria are more important) have viewed ‘the city’ with a double vision: through both an economic and a political/institutional framing. Urban centres have an economic function, and if they do not (if, for example, they consist of a handful of administrative or ecclesiastical buildings and nothing else, as with most of the civitates of Bede’s England), then their urban status is legitimately in doubt. But in nearly all the regions discussed in this book urban centres were also usually defined in politico-administrative terms, as self-governing and tax-raising municipia under late Rome, as episcopal centres in every Christian region, as secular administrative centres in the post-Roman world. Indeed, if they were not (as with some of the North Sea emporia of the eighth century), then once again there are scholars who doubt their ‘real’ urban status. Inside any given region this does not have to be a problem, but a comparative analysis has to take the double focus into account, so as to find a common language that can usefully set Rome, Reco’ polis, Pella, Dijon, York, and Ribe against each other in the same argument.

The best way to do this, with urbanism as with several other concepts discussed in this book, is to set out the key elements of an ideal type. This, indeed, has been tried by others, and quite successfully as well. Martin Biddle’s influential ideal type (he himself uses Edith Ennen’s word, Kriterienbundel) of a town, developed to analyse Anglo-Saxon England, includes twelve elements: (1) defences, (2) street planning, (3) market(s), (4) a mint, (5) legal autonomy, (6) a role as a central place, (7) a relatively large/dense population, (8) economic diversification, (9) ‘urban’ house-types,
social differentiation, complex religious organization, and judicial functions—he suggests that any three or four of these are needed as a minimum characterization of a town. These elements are not all of equal importance, as Biddle himself warns, and some of them in reality depend on others, but his model still stands, as good a set of guidelines as any that has been proposed for an initial framing of urban characteristics, not least because it is robust enough to be exported to regions as un-English as Syria and Africa. I shall use it as an initial framing as well.

This model has been influential, as already observed; but there are still profound differences of emphasis in debates about urbanism. One major reason is a difference between northern and southern Europeans about where its core characteristics lie. In general, for northern historians and archaeologists, medieval urbanism is regarded as a predominantly economic phenomenon. For them, the ‘idea’ of the town focuses on active exchange and craft centres, many of which had no formal juridical status for a long time, many of which were wholly unplanned and very casually administered, and all of which were horrifically muddy and unhealthy—all that wood, all that rain. The word ‘town’ dominates the vocabulary of historians of England, in fact, a word with specifically economic overtones in British English (a ‘city’, by contrast, was only an episcopal centre for a long time, and the word still denotes institutional privilege in modern Britain). Much the same is true for ville in French, or Stadt in German. If we move into the Mediterranean, however, the emphasis changes. Città in Italian and ciudad in Spanish (particularly the former) have a stronger institutional edge, reinforced by the power of central medieval urban political autonomies, as well as by the greater importance of the monumental Roman past. In Italy, indeed, it has needed the coining of a new word, quasi-città, by Giorgio Chittolini to force later medievalists to pay more attention to the economic importance of the group of non-episcopal/non-autonomous economic centres (‘borghi’) like Prato or Vigezzo or San Gimignano, many of which were huge by north European urban standards, since Italian urban historians had hitherto looked so predominantly at the ‘real’ città. When English and French scholars look at the Roman empire, they, too, begin to use ‘city’ and cité for the urban centres they see, and they, too, tend (with different degrees of commitment) to move into a more institutional mode of analysis.

Just to use ‘town’ or ‘city’, then, even inside a single language, involves a set of cultural assumptions that need to be made explicit in order to be controlled. Can one sidestep this, and just use the word ‘urban’, with its spin-offs, ‘urbanism’ and ‘urban centre’, which are more neutral words, and are much the same in all western languages? Even then, however, the northern gaze and the southern gaze have largely different cultural assumptions attached to them about what urbanism is. Bryan Ward-Perkins, in an elegant recent article, unpicked some of the assumptions employed, ei-

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ther implicitly or explicitly, by participants in the active Italian debate about early medieval urbanism (including me, and indeed him), drawing clear distinctions between the British and the Italian participants, who argue from, in effect, the opposite ends of the European spectrum of presuppositions about what the core elements of ‘townness’/‘cityness’ should be, the British with (let’s say) early medieval Hamwic in the back of their minds, but at least some Italians thinking of imperial Rome.

This is not a framework I can extract myself from, as a British historian with a longstanding commitment to a research debate in Italy. I shall in this chapter be as loose as possible about the details of terminology, with ‘city’, ‘town’, and ‘urban centre’ used as near-synonyms, although I shall use ‘city’ more in the Mediterranean and ‘town’ more in the North. But my basic definition of urbanism remains dominated by economic criteria, for these seem to me, in the last analysis, the most significant. A relative demographic concentration, a market, and economic activities structurally different from those of the countryside are the core criteria that will be used here, as a minimum characterization of urban activity; if *civitates* (or *poleis*, or *mudun*) ceased to have these characteristics, or never acquired them, then they would no longer be urban, and they will be discussed differently. The evidence for urbanism by this set of criteria is largely archaeological in our period, so these discussions of urban trends will privilege archaeology. The available evidence being as usual also restricted and chance-driven, however, other criteria will sometimes be used, such as the nature of housing and the patterning of streets, to fill these out; ‘urban’ house-types (leaving aside the potential problem of circular argumentation in such a formulation) can be seen as a marker for differentiations in economic activity, while a street plan, although most immediately revealing a political/institutional element, the existence of an authority capable of creating or maintaining regular street alignments, is often a sign of relative population density as well.

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