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## Book Review

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**Lords and Towns in Medieval Europe: the European Historic Towns Atlas Project**, edited by Anngret Simms and Howard B. Clarke, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, 552 pp., £85 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-7546-6354-6.

In 2006, the Royal Irish Academy hosted a conference on ‘Topography and Power in Medieval Towns’. The conference had its origins in the European Historic Towns Atlas Project. Founded in 1955, the project aimed to bring unity to scholarship on Europe’s urban centres in the aftermath of World War II. (p.13) The intention had been that each of the founding countries would produce studies or atlases for their major towns, with common attributes such as a 1:2500 core map that would enable comparative research between towns from different countries. (pp 18-19) The 2006 conference, organised by the editors of this volume, Anngret Simms and Howard Clarke, followed in this spirit of comparative research.

The current volume has its origins in this conference. Based on the common theme of how seigneurial power influenced the creation of urban spaces in medieval Europe, the volume continues to explore ‘how this process in turn influenced urban form in relation to ground plans’ (p. 1). Comprising five sections, the volume includes case studies by scholars from across Europe, many of whom have had direct experience in the towns’ atlas project in their respective countries. Part I, which includes chapters by Anngret Simms and Dietrich Denecke, grapples with the issues of comparative research in urban studies. Simms discusses the origins of the European Historic Towns Atlas Project, while Denecke explores the origins of comparative approaches in historico-topographical analysis of towns and cities. Both authors discuss the complexities of this comparative work, before emphasising the need to develop a rigid thematic framework to complete such analysis. They propose this might include comparable themes such as topography and morphology. Denecke, in turn, suggests some of the concerns of conducting such comparisons through the European Historic Towns Atlas Project, which fundamentally includes the fact that some of the collections are not ‘readily available’ to scholars (p. 47).

As the editors themselves acknowledge, the core of the book is to be found in Parts II and III, which offer a series of extremely useful, succinct and enlightening case studies from national perspectives across the core, and periphery, of medieval Europe. Some diverge slightly from the core theme to discuss the contexts of their individual country’s towns’ atlas project, such as Sandrine Lavaud’s study of Bordeaux, before exploring the theme of seigneurial power in their own town or region. Others such as Peter Johaneck and Ferdinand Opll present strong comparative studies of a number of towns across regions including the Holy Roman Empire and Austria. These provide a strong synthesis of the influence of princes on the growth of towns across central Europe, with an emphasis on

elements such as fortification, castles or fortified houses, religious influences, economy and society.

The importance of rigid town planning to understand the phases of growth of these towns, alongside distinct morphological features, is emphasised by most of the authors. Some of the authors, such as Terry Slater in his study of English marketplaces, have utilised modern mapping to explore the geometry that underpinned town features in many parts of Europe. Paul Niedermaier discusses the usefulness of the Romanian towns' atlases to distinguish the differences in townscape between towns that fell under the cultural sphere of Byzantium (Walachia and Modlova) and those under that of the central European sphere (Transylvania) (p.288). Howard Clarke brings Ireland to the foreground in a chapter on the planning and regulation of Irish towns during the period from Anglo-Norman settlement to plantation. Here, he discusses the importance of feudal structures to the development of early Norman towns, including the granting of charters, which offered strict guidance for the growth, and governance, of towns. He discusses the significant contraction of the colonial area and, therefore, towns before the sixteenth century, and then the renewed emphasis on towns under plantation schemes in Ireland, which saw them become tools of social regulation.

Part IV moves to explore the symbolic meaning of town plans. Here, the discussion is underpinned by an acknowledgement of how medieval town plans can be interpreted as reflections of the religious and cosmological views of medieval city dwellers. Derek Keene, for example, discusses how medieval planners in Winchester, directed by King Alfred, attempted to remodel the city's street plan and church buildings to provide allusions to Rome and Jerusalem amongst others. As such, the city imbued a symbolic landscape, heightened still further by religious processions and public events. Keith Lilley also alluded to the concept of the symbolic landscape in his chapter. Using the work of J.B. Harley, he reflected on how maps, which are core elements of all the atlases, are both 'culturally embedded and socially constructed objects'. He argues that taking this viewpoint, maps can be examined to 'reveal some of the thinking and experience of those who shaped and inhabited material and imagined urban spaces' (p. 416).

Part V examines critical approaches to the interpretation of large-scale town plans. Archaeology is emphasised in the chapter by Matthias Unterman, while Jürgen Paul discusses the theoretical approach of art historians to the topography of medieval towns. This section ends with a critical application of the Foucauldian concept of governmentality to the town of Trim by Mark Hennessy. Shifting the timeframe forward to the nineteenth century, Hennessy offers an exploration of how a medieval urban landscape can be adapted to fit into the nineteenth century concept of governance and order.

In sum, this is a meaty volume, with a depth of comparative research that is commendable. It provides a fresh approach to, and an exemplar of, how a thematic

emphasis can offer a gateway into comparative studies between the atlases from across Europe. The strong focus on secondary research, both in English and German, alongside the use of the core elements of the atlases themselves, such as the maps, heightens the usefulness of this volume to researchers. There is little doubt that it will become a core text in the field, alongside highlighting the value of continuing the European Historic Towns Atlas Project into the future in order to provide historical contexts to Europe's urban centres.

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