

## Medieval Urban research topics and priorities

### Demography

The following bullet-pointed themes are drawn from the earlier Framework documents:

- intensive study of settlement patterns through time
- spatial analysis of such settlement within a chronological framework
- quantification of population density and mobility
- definition of non-urban, proto-urban and urban settlement
- assessment of populations and population structure through time
- comparison of population structures within towns and between towns
- correlation of population density with economic indicators for urban sustainability
- analysis of immigration and emigration as factors in urban development
- rural interaction and colonisation

The issue of provisioning has become much more important given the advent of scientific investigative techniques which significantly enhance the potential of information recovery and understanding. This is particularly the case for well-dated assemblages of fishbone as noted above (with an impact upon macroeconomics, demographic and dietary studies, and awareness of the diversity of species exploitation). Information concerning the utilisation of animals and animal products within medieval towns also benefits from study of animal bone assemblages, evidence now being recovered for urban husbandry as well as consumption (e.g. Grimm 2006). To these can be added the development of food industries such as brewing, the importation of exotic fruits and the use of diet as a social indicator (see a range of useful papers in Karg 2007). Comparison of patterns of dietary consumption between large and small towns, urban and rural sites, and institutions within towns would also be informative. For example, just one theme is the presence of wild animals in urban assemblages – are they more evidence of elite consumption, from hunting, or lower status, from poaching?

Gender studies continue to evolve and the role of women in medieval towns, where they may well be more visible than within rural contexts, should be examined wherever possible. Gilchrist has set out both theoretical and practical approaches to gender studies (1994; 2012). Similarly, the role of children can be explored archaeologically, investigating the social, economic and environmental conditions which impacted upon children as well as, through careful study of skeletal material, the stresses to which they could be subjected (Penny-Mason and Gowland 2014). A volume detailing archaeological approaches to the study of children has been edited recently by Hadley and Hemer (2014).

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### Social organisation

The following bullet-pointed themes are drawn from the earlier Framework documents:

- study of the relationship of royal villis to later urban centres
- analysis of the impact of the church on urban settlement
- examination of early estates and their relationships to towns
- definition of territorial and other boundaries in relation to proto-urban and urban settlement

These priorities were glossed by data acquisition requirements of which can still be stressed:

- the establishment of basic chronologies
- the ranking of settlement
- the examination of settlement morphology
- the definition of status
- a more developed understanding of spatial analysis in towns
- detailed examination of buildings, their location, function and form
- the distribution of wealth within and between towns
- the adaptation of urban life to specialisation

To these can be added the question of urban identity and its manifestation within the historic environment. Displays of power and status, together with the broadcasting of 'urban' values, can all be explored (see Ayers 2014b). Comparisons between modes of expression within towns, between towns of different size and rank, and between town and country would be useful. The social impact of environmental and political change, notably that of the Reformation at the end of the Middle Ages, requires study.

The following sub-periods for examination of urban growth (and/or decline) remain valid:

- pre-Danish settlement
- Anglo-Scandinavian towns
- pre-Conquest growth
- the impact of the Normans
- the 12th-century 'renaissance'
- later medieval expansion, contraction and renewal
- post-medieval change
- early-modern development; and industrialisation

A further addition here may be interest in the Anarchy period and impacts across the east of England, alongside the observation that continuities as well as change are important.

As before, however, the lack of data for many towns, notably the smaller ones, needs to be addressed. Comparative assessment of urban settlement across the region will not be possible without broader collation and publication of information.

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### Economy

Urban change is driven by economics and can be viewed through the complexity of urban society, attendant growth of urban infrastructure and institutions, the variety and diversity of resource acquisition, the range of trades and industries, and commercial outlets. Archaeological research can explore such urban attributes through

- evidence for commercial and industrial activity
- definition, specialisation, marketing and distribution of products
- linkages between social and political development and economic activity
- communications between towns and with the hinterland
- resource acquisition and utilisation
- specialised facilities and buildings
- institutional structures and facilities
- technological innovation

Further and detailed study of buildings and structures is required across the east of England to repeat the success of synthetic work and approaches in Sandwich (Pearson 2009) and Bristol (Leech 2014). Recently for Colchester, for example, it has been flagged that a lack of suitable timbers for dendrochronological dating in a sample from the town suggests that, as in other Essex urban areas, timber came from intensively-managed woodlands reacting to urban pressure. This may highlight a research challenge, where more success in dating may be achieved from only higher status buildings (Stenning 2013:271).

Wider economic development needs to be explored within the context of urban growth and/or decline. Indeed, the concept of urban 'decline' should be investigated both chronologically and conceptually. Archaeological consideration of the matter is not new but nevertheless requires further work. Slater and Higgins asked as long ago as 2000 - 'What is urban decline: Desolation, decay and destruction, or an opportunity?' (2000, 1 - 22) and a recent paper, in revisiting the issue for the 15th century, has noted that perceived decline may easily have been adaptation to changing circumstances and that variability of urban experience perhaps reflects the commercial and political networks of individual towns (Jervis 2017). Comparative data from the east of England, a region with a vibrant and diverse medieval urban network would be a useful addition to the debate.

While the complexity of urban economic organisation needs study, so too does its impact upon urban hinterlands. This impact can be explored by:

- examination of evidence for industrial zoning
- study of the relationship of industrial and commercial sites to distribution routes
- correlation of evidence for status with product specialisation and output
- the relationship of market centres both to one another and within urban hierarchies.

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### Culture and religion

Urban lifestyle was the subject of a recent colloquium held in Lübeck, northern Germany. It explored the manner in which urban living was expressed through material culture (Gläser 2008) and, while it was often possible to identify a distinct urban culture, it was also sometimes difficult to reconcile apparent paucity of material goods with documentary assessments of urban activity. Herein lies a methodological problem for archaeologists and historians alike. Defining lifestyle from partially surviving evidence can be subjective. Nevertheless, broadening the concept of urban culture from surviving portable objects to include urban topography, spaces and buildings, the relationships of urban places and institutions one to another, and the adoption of analytical techniques such as those adopted by King for the elite houses of Norwich (King 2009) enables urban lifestyle to emerge with greater clarity. Urban existence dictated certain modes of living and archaeological research needs to characterise this existence and to explore meaning within the urban landscape.

In summary there, identification of urban culture through archaeological research can be achieved by

- identifying particular characteristics of urban culture
- developing methodologies which explore complexity of and meaning within urban culture
- examining how urban values and ideas were expressed to the wider community
- considering influences and investment strategies which were facilitated by urban living and institutions
- exploring how technological innovation and the adoption of new materials and practices, the production of specialised manufactures were fostered in urban areas

The role of the church within medieval urban society, its relationship to spatial organisation, and its economic contribution to urban life need particular attention. The following areas for research therefore still stand:

- the relationship of the church to urban foundation
- ecclesiastical development within growing towns
- the organisation of parochial life
- the impact of ecclesiastical institutions upon the urban environment and urban living
- the economic influence of the church
- the technological and artistic importance of the church to the local economy and culture
- the social role of the church

Pilgrimage and its economic impacts as well as material traces would be an interesting theme, as well as a consideration of pilgrimage sites along main routes. Impacts of guilds, both religious and craft, can also be a consideration. Diversity of religious practice may emerge through synthetic study (Astill 2009, 267). Recreating processions, ceremonies and urban moments such as crowds for fairs elicits new questions about built space and investments in it, and awareness of streets as symbolic and sensory arenas offer interesting and informative frameworks (e.g. Camille 2001).