

## The city

Even though in the Middle Ages most people live in the countryside, it's the city that sets the tone. This is where the markets emerge at which goods from near and far are exchanged. This is the only place where performance results in a social rise for the individual and his descendants. This picture tour illustrates the rise of the city as a form of settlement. Chronologically, it ranges from around AD 1100 to 1300.

## 01

The city

## The Roman legacy

Of course, not all Roman cities cease to exist during the Migration Period. Primarily those cities last where a bishop used to reside. In Trier, Mainz, Cologne, in Rome, Milan and Genoa, in Paris, London and Tarragona, a small community of city residents entrenches itself. They convert the ancient amphitheaters and temples into provisional fortifications, and survive.



Modern buildings in the Augustan Theater of Marcellus in Rome.

## 02

The city  
A local market

Cities remain to be local centers. Soon new cities come into being in places where an important monastery, a royal palace, or a pilgrimage site serves as an economic stimulus. When the farmers begin to produce surpluses in the mid-11th century, they transport them to the cities to sell them. This generates a limited trade on a local scale.



Reconstruction of the Palace of Aachen during the time of Charlemagne. Photo: Gerhard Curdes / GNU FDL 1.2

## 03

The city  
Zurich

Zurich is a good example of such a local center. With its location ideal for transport, it dates back to Roman times. The Roman fortress survived, serving as a place of residence of a secular ruler. Since Carolingian times, a count has resided there. Founded by Ludwig the German, Fraumunster Abbey acts as another focal point. It has the right to mint coins. So the local farmers come here, to sell their surpluses in Zurich. Zurich was to remain an economic center of local importance only right into the 18th century.



Fraumunster Abbey in the 15th century AD. Detail from a painting by Hans Leu the Elder. (c) Roland Fischer, Zürich (Switzerland) / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0 Unported

## 04

The city  
Venice

Venice, on the other hand, emerges later. In the turbulent times of Late Antiquity, farmers settle in the lagoon. It provides shelter, salt and fish. Salt is an important commodity. In a time without refrigeration, it's the only means available to make meat durable. Soon the inhabitants of Venice earn an additional income, aside from agriculture and livestock, through trading in salt and other goods. Wood and slaves in particular are coveted in the Middle East. Courageous sailors brought these goods to Sicily, Greece, and Syria as early as the 9th century. Towards the end of the 10th century, Venice, with the help of its commercial fleet, conquered its first trading emporia. It gains in power, becomes a sought-after ally – for the Emperor of the West and the East. The political and military aid of the lagoon city is rewarded with trade privileges. At the onset of the First Crusade, Venice is already one of the most important trading powers of the Mediterranean.



Bird's eye view of Venice. Copper engraving by Matthäus Merian, c. 1650.

## 05

The city  
Outremer

Outremer, over-seas, that's the Crusaders' term for the states they set up after the First Crusade in the Holy Land. They conquer not only Jerusalem, but also found four dominions: the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem. To hold these Christian empires in enemy territory, their rulers need a constant supply of knights from their homeland. Thus they're in need of a fleet, to ensure transportation. Fleets are expensive. Consequently, the princes use the existing fleets of the Italian trading cities and reward them with trading emporia in the Crusader states. Needless to add, that they transport not just people but also goods.



Map of the Christian Crusader states. Map: MapMaster / CC BY-SA 3.0

## 06

The city

## The trade expands

Once they have arrived in the Orient, the Western knights, coming from their narrow, dark and unheated castles, are enthralled by the luxury around them. Elegant decor, delicate dishes, and fine robes – they appreciate all this during their stay in Outremer. Returning home, they're not ready to give it up. And so the demand for luxury goods is also growing in the West. A demand that wants to be satisfied. To fulfill all the small wishes, though, the nobles must increase their yields. They, too, are bringing surpluses to the market and trying to squeeze money from their subjects. The easiest way to do this is where cash circulates: on the market.



The Norman Kings of Sicily are among the first to imitate the flamboyance of the Orient. Throne room of the La Zisa summer residence, Palermo. Photo: KW.

## 07

The city

## New markets

Thus it's in the ruler's interest to unite as many traders as possible in his territory. To this end, he founds a city and gives it market privileges and the right to mint coins. The holder of a market privilege is entitled to organize a market: a weekly market for the trading of regional products, and a fair market to attract supra-regional merchants. The town lord guarantees the protection of the traders. The city is a demilitarized zone where the authorities have the monopoly of legitimate violence. To provide legal certainty to the foreign traders, courts of law are established that judge according to the customary commercial law during the market – without preferring their own citizens.



Statues of Roland symbolize the town privilege, especially in the North of Germany. Photo: KW.



## 08

The city

## A wave of city foundations

The 12th century witnesses a wave of city foundations. One of them is Bern. Berchthold V of Zähringen founds this city on an island in the Aare River at the end of the 12th century. He gives it the market privilege and endows it with everything required. Burgdorf, Bräunlingen, Freiburg im Breisgau, Fribourg / Freiburg im Üechtland, Haslach im Kinzigtal, Murten, Neuenburg am Rhein, Offenburg, Rheinfelden, Thun, and Villingen; Bern is not the only Zähringer foundation. And this isn't the only noble family that upgrades its rule by newly founded cities. Think of Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony from 1142, Duke of Bavaria from 1156 to 1180! Braunschweig, Lübeck, and Munich go back to him, to name only the more important of his towns.



Foundation of the city of Bern by Berchthold V. Illustration of the Tschachtlanchronik, 15th cent. Photo: Adrian Michael / CC BY-SA 3.0

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The city

# And how did the ruler earn money with this?

The town lord derives his financial profit from all sorts of charges and tariffs. The privilege to mint coins is the most important income for him. Its owner determines which money should circulate on the market. Anyone who wants to do business in his city has to exchange the coin prescribed for the market – at a compulsory course fixed by the town lord. An ideal means of collecting a kind of VAT without expensive administration. From time to time, the old coins are withdrawn from circulation and must be exchanged for new ones, which feature a different imagery.



Zurich pfennigs from the 14th century. All pictures from auction catalogs of Sincona, Zurich.

## 10

The city

## Supra-regional markets: the fairs

Adding to the regional fairs, international, long-lasting trade fairs are gaining ground, which attract merchants from near and far. Until the high Middle Ages, the most important trade fairs are the Champagne trade fairs that have been held six times a year in the cities of Troyes, Bar-sur-Aube, Lagny-sur-Marne, and Provins since the mid-11th century. They are so important because they last the whole year long, with only one short interruption, thus constituting a permanent market at which traders from all over the world can be found. Bringing their spices and luxury articles, the Italian merchants come to Champagne to meet the Flemish colleagues who offer precious fabric.



Cloth merchants are presenting their goods on the market. Nuremberg Housebook, 15th cent.

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The city  
The Zurzach fair

Switzerland is in the shade of this business. Its most important trade fair is the Zurzach fair, which was established long after the Champagne trade fairs had declined. It flourished in the early modern times.



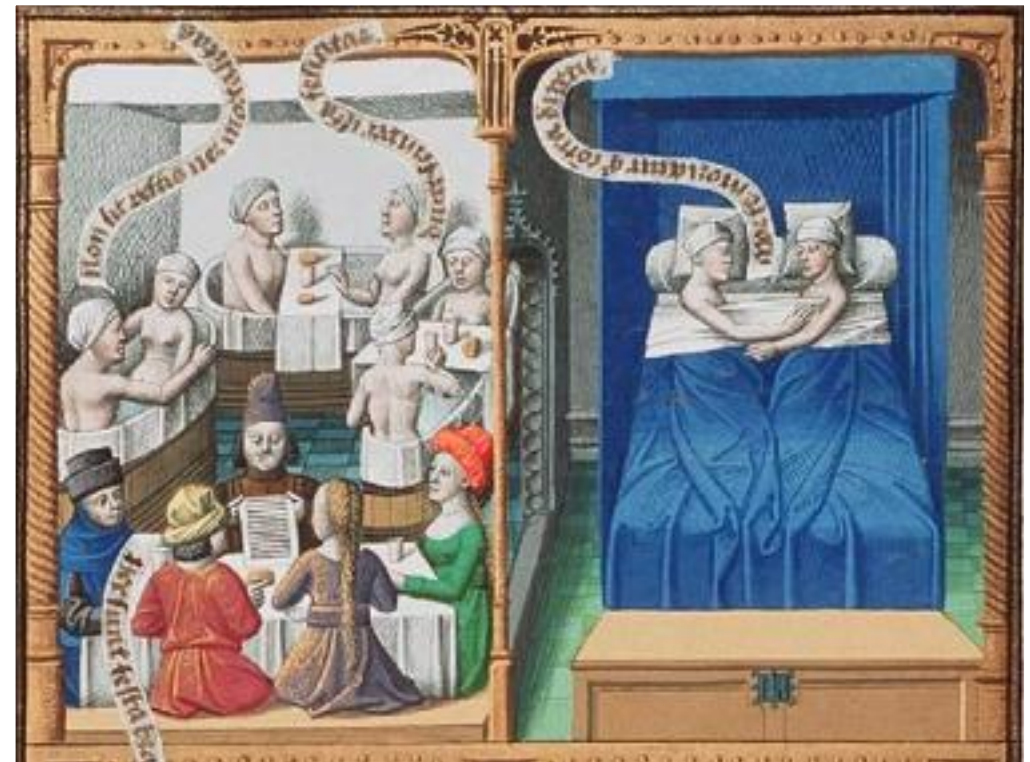
The Zurzach fair. 1549 woodcut.

## 12

The city

## More than its market: the city

Where markets are held regularly, people settle who use these markets. Traders regularly buy the surpluses offered on the weekly markets, to transport them to distant markets and sell them at a profit there. Local craftsmen manufacture the regional products into goods that not only return to the region, but are exported. And a service industry develops. The citizen demands entertainment, a public bathing house and a public brothel. The shaver not only shaves, but also provides basic medical care. Whoever wants to build a house turns to the specialist. In the city, the traveler receives accommodation, food and every service he needs for himself and his goods.



Urban service industry: the inn, the bathing establishment and the brothel. Book painting, c. 1475.

## 13

The city

## Urban air makes you free

The city fascinates all the people living in the countryside. They know the city because they bring their goods to the urban market. There they see the magnificent churches. The impressive town hall. The welcoming inn. Perhaps they notice that the citizens can afford the luxury goods they have to do without. Because the city allows social rise. No master calls for labor service and curtails self-initiative. Urban air makes you free! Since the Middle Ages, the city has attracted people from its hinterland. They are the ones who make cheap workmen for the local artisans. The immigrants make the city grow. Then and now.



Cityscape of Cologne, a cog in the foreground. Schedelsche Weltchronik, 15th cent.

## 14

The city

## How big is a medieval city?

The medieval city is a small one. The average city has a population of 2,000 to 10,000. Around 950, the number draws closer to 2,000, around 1300 closer to 10,000. And except for Geneva, all cities in Switzerland are of regional importance only. The big cities are located in the Orient: Cairo and Cordoba unite 50,000 to 100,000 people in their urban area, leaving all Christian metropolises behind. Even such an important metropolis as Nuremberg has less than 20,000 residents.



City view of Nuremberg. Schedelsche Weltchronik, 15th cent.

## 15

The city

## Here are some figures from Switzerland

For around the turn of the 14th to the 15th century, we have some population numbers. Naturally, these aren't concrete figures, but merely approximations. Sankt Gallen: 2,300-2,900; Schaffhausen: 4,000; Winterthur: 2,200; Zurich: 5,700; Geneva, a trading center of supra-regional importance at the time, has 17,300 residents around 1580 and the fair site of Zurzach 500 around 1510.



Old Town of Schaffhausen. The city center and the various city expansions are clearly visible in the map. 1642 copper engraving by Matthäus Merian.



## 16

The city  
Interests

Many people come together in the city. And they all have differing interests. The farmers, who bring their agricultural surpluses into the city, hope to obtain the highest prices possible there. Traders intend to buy the grain as cheaply as possible, and then resell it for as much money as possible. The bakers want to make a good profit from the bread they produced. And all those who rent their working power for money depend on buying their daily crust as cheaply as possible.



Bakers. Illustration of a book of hours, 1490-1500.

## 17

The city

## The city as a haven of peace or a center of conflict?

And this is not the only conflict of interest. Those who live in the city have to adjust. It's necessary to find compromises. The citizens develop a new self-awareness, knowing that they're part of a strong community. And so they start creating justice.



Council session. Codex Monacensis, 15th cent.