



BOOK REVIEW

Joe Chick. *Urban Society and Monastic Lordship in Reading, 1350–1600*

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Despite the mass of research that has appeared on late medieval English towns since the revival of interest in medieval urban history in the mid-1970s, it is surprising how many towns still await detailed individual examination. Joe Chick's history of post-plague Reading helps to remedy this situation in relation to one of the success stories of the later Middle Ages. In 1334, Reading's taxable movable wealth ranked it at fortieth place in the urban hierarchy, but by the time of the 1524 subsidy, the town, which had prospered on the basis of its expanding cloth industry, had risen to twelfth place in terms of its tax payment. This monograph offers a comprehensive survey of Reading's economic growth, political development, and religious change in this period, and follows its history down to the end of the sixteenth century. Reading was one of forty-one English monastic boroughs (i.e., towns with a single dominant monastic overlord), and its abbey was one of the largest and wealthiest in the country. Norman Trenholme's pioneering study of the monastic boroughs tended to focus on the violent conflicts that occurred between burgesses and their overlords in towns such as St Albans and Bury St Edmunds (*The English Monastic Boroughs: A Study in Medieval History* [1927]). By contrast, while seeing monastic towns as a distinct group in terms of their "robust" form of lordship, with their townsmen typically failing to achieve the degree of self-government found in the royal boroughs, Chick also shows the variety of different experiences within towns with a monastic overlord. At Reading, although violence did break out in 1243, this was very much the exception in town–abbey relations. Such conflict as did occur in the post-plague period took the form of legal battles rather than bloodshed, something typical even in those monastic towns where violence did periodically occur. Nevertheless, Chick criticizes James Clark's emphasis on shared interests and collaboration between monasteries and their urban tenants, instead portraying this relationship at Reading as being "distant," rather than either hostile or cooperative.

Histories of monastic towns often simply divide their political history into pre- and post-Dissolution periods, but Chick offers a far more complex picture, dividing the years between 1350 and 1600 into six sub-periods and showing that, while the townsmen were making gains even before the Reformation, full self-government was not achieved until as late as the charter of 1560. Nor was the Reformation a turning point in the economic life of Reading, with the growth of the cloth industry taking off from around 1470 and the town continuing to enjoy prosperity even after the Dissolution. Economic historians are familiar with the negative effects of the expansion of London's trade on England's provincial ports, but Chick suggests that the example of Reading suggests that the growth of the capital could also stimulate its satellite towns, something which would repay further research. Even

in terms of piety and the town's religious life, the dissolution of the abbey was less of an influence than the Crown's general religious policies, with royal policy also being a crucial factor in determining the success of the townsmen's push for self-government.

Given Chick's focus on the influence of Reading's post-1470 prosperity on its political and religious history, it might perhaps have been more logical to have begun the book with an account of economic change rather than with a detailed narrative of changes in town-abbey political relations. Much emphasis is placed on the ability of social network analysis (SNA) to reveal relationships between individuals, although some of the "graphs" offering visualizations of these relationships have to be consulted online, rather than being available in the book itself (on SNA, see also Cornell Jackson, "Using Social Network Analysis to Reveal Unseen Relationships in Medieval Scotland," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32, no. 2 [2017]: 336-43). For Chick, such analysis shows that although the town government became more oligarchic after the Dissolution, in everyday life there was "continued interaction between top-level civic officials and middling status inhabitants" (94), although given that these interactions included cases of debt and conveyancing, it is hard to imagine that anyone would ever have thought otherwise. Chick's characterization of town-abbey relations as distant relies partly on the lack of bequests to Reading abbey by the townspeople. Yet, he himself also notes that wills can hide important aspects of lifetime piety, citing the example the Ludlow Palmers' guild, which included at least sixty-three Reading residents as members but which did not receive a single bequest in the surviving wills of the town's testators. Finally, given Chick's portrayal of town-abbey relations, it is a pity that the book did not offer a more detailed engagement with the contrasting account offered in Peter Rixon's University of Oxford DPhil. thesis ("The Town of Reading, c. 1200-c. 1542), which, he tells us, anticipated by a decade Clark's view of such relationships as being "cooperative" in nature.

Nevertheless, despite criticisms that can inevitably be made of specific points within Chick's study, urban historians will learn much from its detailed account of economic, political, and religious change in late medieval Reading and from the frequent comparisons and contrasts that it makes with other English urban communities, which help to locate the town within the wider development of urban society. The book's use of SNA is likely to open up similar studies of other towns, it includes useful discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of the surviving sources, and it suggests a number of new directions for future research.