

## Cities of Strangers: Making Lives in Medieval Europe

**Review Number:** 2438

**Publish date:** Friday, 5 February, 2021

**Author:** Miri Rubin

**ISBN:** 9781108481236

**Date of Publication:** 2020

**Price:** £57.99

**Pages:** 204pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/european-history-1000-1450/cities-strangers-making-lives-medieval-europe?format=HB>

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Sarah Rees Jones

Cities and towns are places of movement and mingling, coming and going, settling down and moving on, and they always have been. The fluid dynamics of urban life have long fascinated artists and preoccupied people in power. The ‘London Lickpenny’, a poem about the London metropolitan region composed around 1400, captured this vivacity but also the risks, even dangers, that confronted a stranger travelling across London.<sup>(1)</sup> In a bouncy rhyme it recalls the appealing street cries and smells of the city, but also the trickery and thievery at every turn, from the lawyers of Westminster to the street vendors around Cheapside, until at last the stranger, having lost and never recovered the coat on his back, escapes to a pastoral idyll in rural Kent.

*Cities of Strangers* is a very welcome addition to studies of cities that focus on this fluidity of urban life. It is derived from the Wiles lectures delivered by Professor Miri Rubin at Queen’s University, Belfast in 2017. The Wiles Lectures are a regular, occasional series of lectures on broad historical themes that were established in the 1950s ‘to promote the study of the history of civilisation and to encourage the extension of historical thinking into the realm of general ideas’.<sup>(2)</sup> They have produced a distinguished series of publications by Cambridge University Press offering works that make major historical themes accessible and relevant to general audiences but that also offer a distinctive perspective.

*Cities of Strangers* accomplishes this dual task with energy and eloquence. It both offers an introduction for those unfamiliar with the social history of medieval cities and carries an argument about the development of a tendency at the end of the middle ages, and over the long 15th century in particular, towards more exclusionary, persecuting, societies. The canvas is broad. Rubin tells us that it was the events of 2015—and particularly the Syrian diaspora—that led her to examine the deep history of attitudes towards migrants in the medieval past. She also draws inspiration from modern studies of migrant nations, particularly the USA, to ask how towns function within migration processes. She has read widely in the urban history of both western and central Europe in most of the main European languages, and the chronological frame is similarly ambitious, covering more than two centuries of very dramatic changes in urban life c. 1300 - 1500. A particularly welcome feature is her inclusion of relatively recent scholarship. Her reading is enriched, for example, by the ways in which scholarship on medieval towns in central and eastern Europe has flourished

since the 1980s (particularly under the aegis of scholars such as Katalin Szende at the Central European University in Budapest), and by the broad sweep of urban studies fostered by centres such as the Henri Pirenne Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Ghent. This extensive reading is communicated with verve and draws the reader in through the use of rich detail and engaging prose. It is, of course, far from being the first overview of the medieval urban history of this period but it is the first to bring it up to date with current concerns and interests. Whereas previous overviews of medieval urban development have focussed on governance, social structure, economics, or the built environment, the focus of *Strangers* is on diversity and migration.

The structure of the book is shaped by the four lectures on which it was based, although Rubin creates an overarching argument through them. The first lecture provides an introductory overview of the extent and nature of urbanisation in later medieval Europe. The chapter makes the case for aiming at a truly comparative understanding that embraces the whole of Europe rather than rooting arguments in the experience of particular regions (such as the Low Countries, France, or Italy). In contrast to some urban historians writing in the earlier 20th century, such as Henri Pirenne or Jacques Le Goff, Rubin therefore emphasises the diversity of urban types across Europe, in which only some urban communities in some regions exercised full powers of self-government, while many others were subject to the jurisdiction of princes and major lords. Perhaps most important is the insight that the majority of towns were complex compositions of varieties of overlapping jurisdictions, between commune and lord, church and state. Building on the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as historians such as Patrick Lantschner, Rubin emphasises the polycentric complexity of towns as lived environments that were ever evolving.<sup>(3)</sup> She uses this idea of continual flux to introduce the idea that there was considerable variety and continual adaptation in the arrangements urban magistrates and residents made for travelling traders. Rubin wants to move the reader away from thinking of the Middle Ages as either a static or homogenous past; rather it was full of historical complexity and contingency.

However, Rubin also finds over-arching similarities in conceptual approaches towards strangers across Europe in this period. These were in part the result of a shared administrative language (in particular Latin) that ensured that common terms (such as *forinsecus*, or outsider, for stranger) were used in most towns. A common heritage of Christian doctrine and forms of law inherited from the classical past also provided a common conceptual framework that Rubin argues was inherently *cosmopolitan* in its principles; that promoted movement and encouraged the flourishing of trade routes, pilgrimages, and the growth of towns. This common language and these shared attitudes therefore entrenched the cultural necessity of migration and a common understanding that the core function of towns was to support the movement of people. Such commonality framed the cultural experience of travel and the creation of networks of support for itinerant traders—such as the development of international trading companies, agreements, and confederations—and encouraged investment in the infrastructure of travel from roads and markets to inns and hospitals.

Rubin argues that this common conceptual framework also underpinned the creation of a common medieval ideal of cities as moral communities. This shared morality influenced the production of local regulations concerning the conduct of different types of residents and visitors in the interests of upholding an ideal of the *common good* that privileged unity of purpose over equality, and so provided a basis for discrimination between different types of urban resident and visitor.

Rubin suggests however that it was popular reaction to specific historical events that turned this potential for discrimination into more active persecution and exclusion of certain kinds of strangers in the 15th century. If there was one unifying experience that changed attitudes it was that of the unexpected impact of a global pandemic, the plague later labelled the 'Black Death', that swept across Europe in repeated epidemics from the mid 14th to 17th centuries. The social and economic consequences of this dramatic and unexpected urban mortality resulted in fundamental changes in urban society, that in turn triggered a greater willingness by urban magistrates to create discriminatory policies of exclusion and expulsion. The timeliness of this message, composed long before the global pandemic of 2020, cannot have been intended by Rubin, but it does build on the work of many earlier scholars who have traced the multiple connections between the

existential shock of the plague and an increasing conservatism and religious fundamentalism among the middling sorts of people who tended to exercise power and authority in medieval towns.<sup>(4)</sup> For many scholars the creative works of the early Renaissance (as this period is often labelled) with their appeal to the ideal of an uncorrupted classical past, was associated not with progressive politics but with a new conservatism and increased persecution of those who failed to adhere to moral norms.<sup>(5)</sup>

Rubin explains that her interest in conceptual frameworks, combined with the nature of the surviving evidence, will lead her to focus on the regulatory framework for strangers in towns, not on their experience of living in towns. This an important qualification of the whole project and one that it is useful to bear in mind in the reading of the book. It of course carries with it the danger of buying into the rhetoric of lawmakers rather than exploring that messiness of lived urban processes that Lantschner and many others have advocated. Rubin's pre-emptive answer to this criticism is to refine her purpose still further: she will 'disrupt the categories of medieval thought' about strangers by focussing in particular on two groups that would not normally be defined as strangers at all, that is Jews and women. Women, of course, were a half or more of the population of all European towns, while Jews (although expelled entirely from some kingdoms) were historically long-established communities in many European cities. These two case studies therefore simultaneously stretch the concept of 'stranger' to include residents long settled in towns, and yet also restrict it by omitting the majority of migrant strangers who travelled in search of sustenance, work, profit, education, or cultural curiosity, from the prosperous to the starving, from the ebullient diplomats of sovereign rulers to modest pilgrims, students and labourers. Rubin's core argument however is that the impact of the 14th-century crisis led Jews and women to be increasingly treated *like* strangers as attitudes towards strangers became more closely circumscribed in urban law. In other words, her purpose is to examine the broader consequences for social thought in general of the developing legal framework relating to strangers in particular in medieval cities after c. 1350.

Chapter Two, *Strangers into Neighbours*, digs deeper into the public policies constructed by and for towns, and relating to migrants and settlers. The chapter considers how, before 1300, rulers conquering new swathes of territory (from central Europe to the British Isles) often tried to incentivise or even enforce migration from their core territories to towns in their new colonies. Fascinating insight into the social consequences of these policies are drawn, *inter alia*, from Matthew Steven's detailed work on Ruthin in Wales where new English settlers lived alongside native Welsh but enjoyed higher social status and wealth.<sup>(6)</sup> Another force encouraging structured migration was the growth of multi-state structures, such as maritime empires, or the rise of affiliated leagues of towns, such as the Hanseatic League, that encouraged movement between towns across large regions within Europe.

Once settled, towns developed complex rules for who could settle and stay. Special arrangements were made for short-term visitors in the form of hostels, while those who aspired to full citizenship were required to fulfil certain requirements such as owning property, entering a guild, marrying into a citizen family, and proving their worth over a period of initial residence. It was from such requirements that in the later middle ages systems of apprenticeship and training were conceived. Given the tendency of such rules of admission to reflect social values it was inevitable that some types of stranger came to be considered more desirable than others.<sup>(7)</sup> As Rubin shows, such prejudice favouring the acceptance of selected migrants extended across the social spectrum from apprentices recruited into minor crafts, to elite urban society where gentlemen with legal training or international financial expertise were welcomed into positions of power in towns since they could connect cities profitably into wider international networks of knowledge, trust and power.

Immigration could also provoke conflict. The social standing of the wealthiest strangers sometimes enabled such groups to live in towns free from the hindrance of local regulations that were designed to inhibit the movements and lives of more lowly strangers and could lead to resentment. When lords and kings intervened to manipulate urban trade and trading communities to their own advantage this often had the effect of exacerbating existing local divisions over the desirability of the presence of particular groups of privileged strangers from abroad. In England, but also in Italy, in the 15th century such politics resulted in

the greater regulation and taxation of foreigners and contributed to increased xenophobia and real violence directed against some strangers in some urban communities, such as the murderous attacks on Flemings in England in 1381.<sup>(8)</sup>

Chapters Three and Four provide the two case studies on Jews and women. As already noted Rubin's reasons for this are her desire to move beyond the consideration of strangers *per se*, to consider how the development of the regulation of strangers affected other social groups in medieval towns on the eve of the modern era. Full residence or citizenship, as a legal status, was rarely awarded to non-Christians, or to women, in a primarily Christo-centric and patriarchal society. Jews and women were then, legally, decidedly of lower and alienated status. Since they were never fully *insiders*, they were in a sense perpetually *outsiders*, or strangers.

Of the two case studies, Jews are perhaps the more convincingly treated as 'a touchstone of the new urban ethics of exclusion'. Rubin traces the development of conflicting regulations relating to Jews. Some lords and urban communities encouraged Jewish immigration. Detailed studies of Jews in urban communities, such as Hannah Meyer's work on England or Katalin Szende's work on Hungary, suggest that Jews were not segregated but inhabited mixed neighbourhoods and were fully embedded in urban life, though they never enjoyed full citizenship or positions of public authority over Christians.<sup>(9)</sup> Their lives were often circumscribed by petty limitations and distinctions enabled by adoption of minor bureaucracies. Thus, Jews in Sopron in Hungary were not allowed to own cabbage patches outside the walls of the town, unlike other property owners, and Jews in many places were increasingly required to wear distinctive signs. While civic communities and the official institutions of the Church thus seemed to tolerate and even protect Jews, if as decidedly second-class citizens, contrary forces led to a more hostile and persecuting environment.

At the level of royal government the historian William Chester Jordan identified the development of ideas of 'redemptive governance' among consecrated sovereigns who modelled their authority on an imitation of Christ leading to increasing persecution of Jews who were by then identified as the enemies of Christ. In England and France this led first to the violent persecution of Jews by royal courts and then to their complete expulsion from those kingdoms in 1290 and 1306.<sup>(10)</sup> But persecution was not always a top-down affair. Rubin also draws on the work of scholars such as David Nirenberg who exposed the ways in which tensions over the intermixing of Jews, Christians and Muslims in medieval Spanish towns led to community policing of alleged sexual transgressions between people of different faiths.<sup>(11)</sup> The brunt of such policing was often borne by women who could be savagely punished if caught in forbidden intercourse with a man of a different faith. Rubin argues that these established contexts, both royal and popular, provided a fertile context for the encouragement of new urban regulations first distinguishing Jews and then blaming them for the various crises of the later 14th century, including the plague. This culture of blame was enflamed, Rubin argues, by the spread of a new type of charismatic preaching that responded to the plague as a form of moral crisis and sought to purge cities from all kinds of impurities including those cast as unbelievers and polluters, from Jews to heretics, pigs to prostitutes. Using the example of the inflammatory preaching of San Bernadino in Siena in 1430, and drawing on the work of John van Engen, Rubin sees this movement of purist and populist Christianity arising in the cities of Italy and Germany in the 15th century, enflamed by the preaching of friars who operated beyond the control of the institutional church, and gradually spreading across continental Europe. One ultimate expression of this movement was the eradication of local Jewish communities by murderous violence and their expulsion from many towns and cities from Spain to Poland. Another was the establishment of the first Ghetto for Jews, in Venice, in 1516. The invention of the ghetto was perhaps the complete expression of the long history of ambivalent attitudes towards the Jewish presence in European towns, tolerating and benefitting from their presence but confining them to a distinct quarter, a form of internal expulsion.

Like Jews and some other types of stranger, women in medieval towns were discriminated against by the law, religion and science of the day, despite their essential roles and major presence in urban society. Like Jews, other 'aliens' and the poor they largely failed to be included in the imagined ideal city. Italian artists, in particular, simply excluded them from their visual depictions of perfect cities. But the typicality of these

Italian examples are perhaps not sufficiently questioned in their application to Europe as a whole, particularly in the light of recent work on women's labour and its representation, which tends to emphasise varieties of experience largely arising from the great divergence of local economic contexts that shaped the experience of women, however normalised was the rhetoric of patriarchy.<sup>(12)</sup>

Some readers may be disappointed that the experience of strangers living in towns is not a focus of the book and that the two chosen case studies exclude many of the workers and poor who made up the great majority of the migrant urban population. Scholarship on these topics is certainly available in a vast range of local and regional studies by Shannon MacSheffrey, Charlotte Berry, Milan Pajic, and Bart Lambert to name but a few of those examining the experience of migrants between the Low Countries and England. No doubt syntheses of such work will be forthcoming in the future and will contribute a different perspective to our understanding of the migrant experience.

*Cities of Strangers* is a relatively short book of less than 200 pages. Substantial arguments about the varieties of conditions across Europe, or the singular impact of plague on changing attitudes, are strongly stated and plenty of illustrative material is provided. However, the length and format of the book does not really allow for a sustained analysis of these questions, and that is not its purpose. Above all this is a provocative book, one that asks timely and important questions in a fresh and engaging style. It is perfect of those embarking on medieval studies and needing to understand the relevance of studying that period to their own lived experience. It will fill them with curiosity and a desire to discover more. It is a timely, capacious and, above all, humane work of scholarship that brilliantly brings deeply specialist scholarship into conversation with a much wider audience and a contemporary set of very urgent concerns.

## Notes

1. 'The London Lickpenny' in James M. Dean (ed.), *Medieval English Political Writings*, *Medieval Institute Publications* (Kalamazoo, 1996). Accessed 1 January 2021: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-medieval-english-political-writings-london-lickpenny> [2] [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The Wiles Lectures, <https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/happ/Events/annual-lectures/wiles-lecture-series/> [3]. Accessed 1 January 2021. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Patrick Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities: Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370-1440*, Oxford University Press, 2015. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *Lust for Liberty: the Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425: Italy, France and Flanders*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John M. Najemy, 'Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics' in James Hankins (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 75-104. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Matthew Frank Stevens, *Urban Assimilation in Post-Conquest Wales: Ethnicity, Gender and Economy in Ruthin, 1282-1348*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Sarah Rees Jones, 'English Towns in the Later Middle Ages: the Rules and Realities of Population Mobility' in *Migrants in Medieval England, c. 500–c. 1500*, eds. W. M. Ormrod, E. Tyler, & J. Story, London, British Academy, 2020, pp. 265-297. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Mark Ormrod, Bart Lambert and Jonathan Mackman, *Immigrant England, 1300-1550*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Hannah Meyer, 'Female moneylending and wet-nursing in Jewish-Christian relations in thirteenth-century England', unpublished Cambridge PHD thesis (2009); Katalin Szende, 'Laws, loans and literacies: Trust in Writing in the Context of Jewish-Christian Contacts in Medieval Hungary', in *Religious Cohabitation in Medieval Towns*, ed. Stephane Bosselier and John Tolan, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014, pp. 243-71. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. William C. Jordan, *Men and the Center, Redemptive Governance under Louis IX*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. [Back to \(11\)](#)

12. >The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, chapters by Kathryn Reyerson and Martha C. Howell.[Back to \(12\)](#)
- 

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2438>

**Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/331195>

[2] <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-medieval-english-political-writings-london-lickpenny>

[3] <https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/happ/Events/annual-lectures/wiles-lecture-series/>