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Review: City Geography: A Historical Phase

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CITY GEOGRAPHY: A HISTORICAL PHASE

HENRI PIRENNE. **Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade.** Transl. from the French by F. D. Halsey. 249 pp.; bibliogr. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N. J., 1925. \$2.50. 7 x 5 inches.

This is a book born of long experience and thought, the work of one of the best-known students of city life. Unlike many a work by a scholar of long standing, it is an effort to state simply and broadly the outlines of a story of great importance; it gives bibliographical references only in restrained fashion; and it has the courage to sketch in strong lines in spite of the author's evident appreciation of the complexity of details of regional differences and chronological transmutations.

The geographer who studies the cities and towns of France may gather much help towards their interpretation from M. Pirenne's thesis. In the Paris Basin one finds again and again the town developing in the tenth century more often around a church than around a castle; and yet one finds evidence of a Roman ground plan as at Rouen, Sens, Orléans, etc. M. Pirenne supports the view that the Roman idea of universal organization based upon unity of the Mediterranean lands continued to fill men's minds even after the Emperors had left the Seven Hills. The incoming "barbarians" were more concerned to learn from and to adjust the Roman scheme than to end it; and so the city in western Europe continued, and with it trade was continued though its scale was somewhat reduced. It was trade, as a supplement to agricultural production, that kept the old towns going.

The seventh century, however, saw the great advance of Islam and the consequent breaking of the old Mediterranean unity; the peninsulas of southern Europe were no longer the continent's points of contact with the unifying sea of history—they had become projections of agricultural Europe out into the dangerous unknown. M. Pirenne sees that this change cut down commerce in Europe, led to decay of cities, and made the Carolingians work upon the basis of the idea of self-contained regions with very little trade, though remnants of commercial activity lingered a little in Flanders where the weaving tradition was strong. In the Paris Basin and the Rhineland the episcopal cities almost alone were able to continue through this economic *débacle*; but in southern France and in Italy the civic tradition was stronger, and the aristocracy continued to identify itself with the towns, as in the fortified towns Bologna, San Gimignano, and many another Italian city of medieval tradition.

The spread of the stream of commerce again from Venice and Flanders is ably set out by M. Pirenne, who also shows its liberating influences on the rural population, an influence working often in spite of the contrary wishes of the trading cities. From Flanders we see the ideas of Town Hall, Belfry, and Guild Halls spreading but not taking much effect in the Paris Basin itself where the cathedral dominates the city. The author says little about the streams of civic influence working eastwards from the Paris Basin and Flanders across the Rhine; these are in his opinion secondary expressions of the civic idea, duplicating with modifications what had already been achieved farther west. On the other hand he gives us a subtly woven story of the rise of civic administration replacing feudal custom in the towns bit by bit and leading up to the medieval commune as a collective legal personality.

The traveler in Europe who studies cities with the help of M. Pirenne's book will be much helped towards the interpretation of the contrasts in evolution of civilization that underlie the still persisting differences between towns of northern Italy, of southern France, of the Paris Basin, of Flanders, and of Central Europe. The student of this book will also glean much for reflection concerning the hardening of routine in isolated populations and the refreshing influences of commerce with the merchants' knowledge of other ways and other lands and their impatience of control by the dead hand of custom.

H. J. FLEURE