

Sheila Sweetinburgh, ed., *Negotiating the Political in Northern European Urban Society, c.1400–c.1600* (Tempe, Arizona: Brepols, 2013). Print, 212 pp., €55.00, ISBN: 9782503546667.



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*Review*

Sheila Sweetinburgh's edited collection of essays examines the negotiation of political identity and power in late medieval and early modern urban centres, and takes account of the growing historiographical interest in the ways that individuals and groups in late medieval and early modern society sought to 'place' themselves within larger communities (pp. 1–2). A particular strength of this work is the fact that the collection will be of interest not only to scholars who study medieval political identities, but also to early modern scholars. The period c.1400–c.1600 has been chosen, as Sweetinburgh states, because during this period towns were at the forefront of political, social, and religious changes (ibid.). This timeframe thus permits the authors to carry their conclusions further than the medieval period, and simultaneously allows the reader to see civic identity not as something static, but as something that was evolving, or, as implied by the volume's title, constantly under negotiation.

The collection of essays is certainly impressive and based upon extensive research. Despite being an exploration of civic identity, however, the essays are not dry examinations of official records, but also draw upon various forms of life writing and religious texts. Mark Merry's essay, examined in greater detail below, focuses upon the 'biography' of John Smyth that was constructed from various documents written by him and bequeathed to the Candlemas Guild after his death. Paula Simpson's essay 'The Skin of the Unjust Judge: "Negotiating the Political" in Early Modern Canterbury' examines sermons preached by the cleric, Anthony Kingsmill alongside other more traditional sources. Thus the essays in the collection bring alive

the social history of the formation of urban political identities in their respective regions.

All of the essays within the volume are impressive, but two of them stand out as particularly interesting. Mark Merry's "'Specyall lover and preferer of the polytike and common weale": John Smyth and Ideal Citizenship in Fifteenth-Century Bury St. Edmunds' illustrates how the agency of one man, John, or Jankyn Smyth, contributed to the formation of civic identity. Being a monastic borough, and governed by the Abbey of St. Edmunds, the town lacked formal civic structures. But Merry shows how Smyth's grants to the Candlemas Guild in Bury St. Edmunds set in motion the construction of a de facto civic government. After Smyth's death, the Guild managed Smyth's estates and his continuing bequests to the town, with the result that 'the grants made by Smyth to the town gave the Candlemas Guild a structure on which to base any authority it may have aspired to' (p. 34).

The second essay under scrutiny here is Serge Ter Braake's 'Brokers in the Cities: The Connections between Princely Officers and Town Officials in Holland at the End of the Middle Ages'. Beginning in the medieval period, Braake uses the following cities as a case study: Dodrecht, Amsterdam, Gouda, Delft, and Lieden. Holland, under the rule of the Hapsburg monarchy, was often taxed for wars which did not directly concern the people of Holland. To procure these funds, the Hapsburg Princes would send representatives to the cities of Holland to gain their 'consent' to the provision of these funds. As Braake shows, however, this was not simply a case of a central power exploiting a weaker power: city officials evidently knew how to 'play the system' by establishing cordial relationships with the monarch's representatives — city officials often showered these representatives with gifts — and Dutch city officials used these negotiations to serve their own interests and convince the representatives to further their respective regions' interests with the monarchy. Gradually it became unclear as to who these representatives primarily served: the cities or the monarchy. Braake then shows how the breakdown

of these cordial relationships between city officials and the monarchy's representatives made a significant contribution in the prelude to the Dutch Revolt of 1568.

There are two things which could have been included in this book which would have improved it. One that will be immediately apparent to readers, and one that other reviewers such as Ian W. Archer have also noted, is that the collection would have benefitted from a clearer explanation as to what 'negotiating the political' means in the Sweetinburgh's introductory essay. Such an explanation is entirely absent from Sweetinburgh's introduction. In addition, although the collection is titled 'negotiating the political in Northern European Society', only three of the essays in the collection are devoted to the study of towns outside of England. Hence more essays with a European focus would have provided some balance to what is a relatively Anglo-centric collection. These are, however, the only objections that can be directed towards Sweetinburgh's collection: the volume as a whole is a fine piece of scholarship, and one that will be of value to those whose are interested in medieval and early modern political identities.

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