

Karl Ubl, Köln im Frühmittelalter. Die Entstehung einer heiligen Stadt. 400–1100, Köln (Greven Verlag) 2022, 513 p. (Geschichte der Stadt Köln, 2), ISBN 978-3-7743-0440-6, EUR 60,00.

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Joseph P. Huffman, Carlisle, PA

Producing a civic history intended for both scholars as well as a wider local reading public is a tall order for any historian, but especially so when sixty percent of the time period covered is documented by only a handful of inscriptions. Yet Karl Ubl has more than succeeded in this difficult task by foregrounding the historian's tried and true attention to the admixture of continuity and change over time.

Continuities are carefully documented with Carolingian literary sources and recent archaeological findings, which belie the stereotype of a Dark Age. The vaunted city walls assured a sustained urban life throughout the disruptive transitions from Roman to Frankish rule as well as from Carolingian decline to Ottonian/Salian expansion. Assaults of Vikings and Magyars clearly did not destroy urban life in Cologne. Instead, a late antique Christian tradition, anchored in the veneration of martyred patron saints, sustained the community throughout the Early Middle Ages. Latin culture and education were also preserved, though now within an ecclesiastical orbit. In sum, though times of conflict and change certainly punctuated these many centuries, there was no Dark Age along the Rhine during the lengthy transition from Late Antiquity into the Early Middle Ages.

On the other hand, change came in the form of a new urban identity, signaled by the evolution of the city's name from the Roman *Colonia Agrippina* to the Frankish *Köln*, and thereby its residents from *Agrippinenses* to *Colonienses*. The name change reflected the city's transition from a frontier provincial capital and defensive bulwark against the Franks to a central archiepiscopal see with a confident German-speaking Rhineland merchant community, itself embedded within a newly constituted German Empire reaching from northern Italy to northern Europe. Indeed, by the 11th century Cologne helped form the heart of that empire as a constituent part of the rapidly developing Paris-London-Cologne nexus of trade and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the emergence of imperial prince-archbishops transformed the city's bishops into expansive provincial authorities of the church. This new ecclesiastical identity would in turn chafe against an equally new princely identity bequeathed to the archbishops by Ottonian and Salian emperors through delegated ducal and regalian political authority. The latter authority made the new prince-archbishops increasingly mindful of their own secular territorial interests, focused above all in their role as the *Stadtherr* of Cologne.



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But how does one organize this mélange of continuity and change over seven hundred years of urban history, itself embedded in wider history of a region, church, and empire? Professor Ubl has crafted a creative and insightful *Leitmotiv* for just this purpose: the formation of an urban sacral topography combining old (late antique) and new (early medieval) elements, which ultimately generated a brand or trademark for the medieval city: *Sancta Colonia/Hilliges Köln*. Though not a typical formulation of urban history, this chosen *Leitmotiv* is as plausible as any other and proves important for its capacity to synthesize these structural continuities and changes into a coherent whole. Thus, the period ca. 400–1100 appears comprehensible and meaningful to an intended broad public readership. The continuities of urban structures, Latin literacy, a Christian community united in the veneration of martyr-saints, the administrative role of the bishop, and a manufacturing economy are thus deftly integrated with the changes in ethnic, civic, and social identities, trade, empire, and the administrative roles of the archbishop. For *Sancta Colonia/Hilliges Köln* was a brand adopted by clergy and laity alike by the early 9th century, based on a sacral topography of cathedrals, churches, and shrines containing the legion of relics of their patron saints – holy martyred soldiers, virgins, missionaries, and saintly bishops whose *vitae* were oddly not codified until the 10th century. Much had changed between late antiquity and the 10th century, which allowed broad leeway in the composition of their legends. Thus, the patron saints were a critical part of the Christian community in Cologne, all of whom were pledged to protect, defend, and inspire the faithful residents in times of trial and assault.

The book is divided into three distinct periods defined not by the city's own history but rather by dynastic units of traditional imperial history: Merovingian (400–700), Carolingian (700–900), and Ottonian/Salian (900–1100). It is as much an ecclesiastical and cultural history as an urban history, which is appropriate given the available sources. Assertions based on the absence of evidence can raise challenges though now and then, such as concluding that though there was a Christian community in Cologne there were no bishops for 150 years of late antiquity (5th through early 6th centuries) given the absence of a surviving list of bishop's names for this period. There are also vast source gaps for the 7th-century bishops (only names survive), and yet we have confidence there were bishops in spite of these significant source *lacunae*. Furthermore, the thesis that no other Frankish or German city besides Cologne ever claimed the trademark of holiness would meet with dissent in Mainz¹.

¹ See Heinz Finger, *Das Heilige Köln – Tochter Roms*, Cologne 2020 (Libelli Rhenani, 74), chapter eight (»Das Heilige Köln und die Romimitation des Goldenen Mainz«) at section four (»Der ›Heilige Stuhl‹ von Mainz«), p. 199-124 for 10th-century use of the brand *Sancta Maguntina Sedis* to bolster the Mainz archbishop's claim to be primate of the German church. See also Isnard W. Frank, *Sancta Sedis Maguntina. Willigis und der Heilige Stuhl von Mainz*, in: Helmut Hinkel (ed.), *1000 Jahre St. Stephan in Mainz*.



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Nonetheless, Professor Ubl has made candid and searching assessments of sometimes gossamer thin surviving evidence, and throughout the entire volume he offers measured and careful judgments which may not always be argued for with certainty yet they also cannot be argued against with certainty either. Such decisions prove to stir rather than preclude continued conversation and there is real virtue in this approach. His carefully calibrated approach is one of the many merits of this volume.

The limited source base for this period does not allow for a thematic or close analytical study but rather for a narrative explication through the *Leitmotiv of Sancta Colonia/Hilliges Köln*. Therefore the reader will find a history of the city's structures, primarily ecclesiastical but also spatial and architectural, and will thereby gain a sense of the urban and conceptual structures developed over six hundred years, but not discover much about the people who inhabited these spaces.

Finally, Professor Ubl not only meets the scholarly standards for professional readers, but he also addresses the needs of the intended public audience in an excellent fashion. The volume is written in a style that is easily accessible to a wide reading public while still rigorous in reasoning and measured in assessments. It is a pleasure to read. And Professor Ubl is gracious enough to foreground the claim that his volume is not a final word on historical knowledge about early medieval Cologne but instead an interim report on scholarship to date, which is an important signal to the wider public about the nature of historical knowledge. All historians will be envious of the over two hundred color images and maps which were included in this splendidly produced volume of 450 pages (60 endnote pages). These costly additions document the theme of continuity and change over time in visual and spatial forms which add a beautiful cultural touch to the city's history. The volume will surely appeal to both scholars and civic readers.



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