

**Jörg Oberste, The Birth of the Metropolis. Urban Spaces and Social Life in Medieval Paris, Leiden, Boston (Brill) 2021, XII–276 p., 46 col. fig. (Brill Studies in Architectural and Urban History, 1), ISBN 978-90-04-46528-2, DOI [10.1163/9789004468412](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004468412), EUR 118,00.**

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The Benedictine monastery of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, a Merovingian institution refounded in 1059 and given over to Cluny in 1079, lay on the northern outskirts of Paris, along the (eponymous) rue Saint-Martin that stretched northeast towards Senlis. As its name indicates, it was situated »among the fields« and from an early date owned and oversaw agricultural lands. It held and acquired new lands both near and far. It was thus landowner and landlord, and the hub for the *burgus* – a community, a village, and ultimately an economy. When Philip Augustus built his great walls a little more than a century later, the monastery fell outside the city, still technically a suburb. As Paris grew, the monastery became more and more involved in the processes of urbanization, connected to and part of its economy and society. As the population of Paris increased, as it became increasingly important as a politic, economic, and intellectual center, the monastery of Saint-Martin and the people who lived in the *burgus* were both drivers of, and shaped by, the processes of urbanization that are at the heart of this book. Saint-Martin's extraordinary registers – including the *censiers*, receipts for the management and registers of goods, and rights of landowners (20–25) – permit Jörg Oberste to trace the monastery's role in the social, economic, political, and juridical mechanisms by which Paris went from village to metropolis. While the book spans Paris' beginnings in the Gallo-Roman period to the seventeenth and eighteenth century, its focus is really the period between 1150 (when monastic record keeping took off) and 1400 or so, that period of massive expansion during which Paris became a world capital.

The book is divided into four very uneven chapters. The first, second, and fourth chapters are 25, 58, and 18 pages respectively, whereas the third chapter, focused on Saint-Martin-des-Champs, itself subdivided into four major sections of inquiry, extends to 144 pages. Oberste insists that the book is not about Saint-Martin, but rather that Saint-Martin, because of its importance and because of its outstanding documentary trace, is an ideal case study and thus a through-line to which he brings in other evidence. It makes for something of an uneven reading experience, but is justified analytically. Through the focus on Saint-Martin, Oberste shows that »the primarily [sic] religious landowners in Paris played a dynamic role in the city's urbanisation« (83).



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The first chapter on »Foundations« offers the theoretical and methodological parameters of the inquiry. An early section titled »To Whom does Paris Belong?« is not a hand-wringing meditation on elite memory and power, but rather a serious and profitable discussion of property rights and the relationship between landownership and the processes of urbanization (It would have been better titled »To Whom *did* Paris Belong?«). Although we tend to think of Paris, especially in the high Middle Ages, as a royal city, it was in fact owned by over thirty major (mostly ecclesiastical) landowners, eighteen of whom possessed the right to high justice and who each exercised a variant level of judicial and economic authority over the people (both serfs and settlers) living and working in their territories. The fact and implications of such fragmented and often competing ownership and lordship, which is amply documented and explained in the lengthy third chapter, lies at the center of the project, since Oberste's aim is to track these various authorities (»powers«) through the growing and changing economic, political, and social shape of the city.

The second chapter, »Parisian Spaces«, offers a useful synthesis of the topographical development of the city, from the Gallo-Roman period to the later Middle Ages. Building on Lutetia's Roman settlement, the Merovingian kings established important ecclesiastical foundations (Sainte-Geneviève, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Saint-Denis) that would grow into important monastic institutions, at the same time that a »dense web of cultic locations« connected urban and suburban churches (37). These establishments, with their early claim to lands, would become some of the most important lordships of Paris, rivaling those of the bishop and the king. Growth occurred in the »suburbs« in consort with the urbanization of the center (the *cité*, and the right and left banks). Into this urban landscape would emerge spaces of trade (the markets), of learning (the schools), and of course »spaces of power« (the king). The process of urbanization drove negotiations over boundaries and jurisdictions, relative immunities, and the power to tax and punish.

The meaty, long, dense (and, frankly, sometimes hard to follow) third chapter is titled »The People of Saint-Martin-des-Champs: Social Practices and Urbanisation in a Parisian City Quarter«. This chapter is rooted in a hard-won reconstruction of the processes of urbanization, accomplished primarily through administrative documents, many still published, that were kept by monastic and secular (and royal) institutions, including the *censiers* (registry of tenants) and *censives* (registry of landholding) of Parisian monastic institutions, the cartulary of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, the city's criminal registries, the *Olim*, individual charters and royal acts, and so forth. It traces the nitty-gritty of Saint-Martin's changing role in Paris' economic, juridical, and political landscape. The monastery's lordship over its properties, and especially the *burgus* (township), made it an increasingly powerful actor in this increasingly urban context. Royal privileges granted in the early stages of urbanization often solidified Saint-Martin's authority over the settlers on its lands (both unfree and free). The monks



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took control of this authority in part by processes of increasingly sophisticated bookkeeping. This authority was bolstered by its right to high justice, although this was often disputed and controlled, particularly starting in the thirteenth century by the crown. As the *burgus* grew, it became a center of commercial wealth, and also charity to the poor. It developed its own jails and gallows. It was theatre to its own rituals of power and piety.

The final chapter, »*Paris imaginaire*, or: How Does a Metropolis Arise?« serves as a conclusion, aiming to place the findings about space and power into a broader discursive fabric of what and how a city has and projects meaning. Thus, »consciously designed and densely settled spaces of memory are inherent to metropolises, and within them, narratives that create identity are presented and interpreted« (230). Here, the juridical, economic, and social aspects of power unfurled in the previous chapter are read alongside imagined narratives of the metropolis – that is, the various formulations and laudatory descriptions that visitors to the great city have made over time. Self-conscious statements of Paris' special status as a »universal icon and metropolis« (245) begin to take shape around 1200, precisely at the time of Paris' incipient urbanization.

This is a valuable book for anyone who wants to understand the actual dynamics of Paris' rapid rise, the working of urban lordship in northern Europe, and the step-by-step process of institutional formation in the high Middle Ages. One always feels churlish in reporting it, but the production of the text is marred by frequent typos and other small errors. They are not worth listing individually, but one would have hoped that such a fine and important study would have been better served by its publisher.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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