

Life in a Medieval City

Joseph Gies , Frances Gies

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Life in a Medieval City evokes every aspect of city life in the Middle Ages by depicting in detail what it was like to live in a prosperous city of Northwest Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The time is A.D. 1250 and the city is Troyes, capital of the county of Champagne and site of two of the cycle Champagne Fairs—the “Hot Fair” in August and the “Cold Fair” in December. European civilization has emerged from the Dark Ages and is in the midst of a commercial revolution. Merchants and money men from all over Europe gather at Troyes to buy, sell, borrow, and lend, creating a bustling market center typical of the feudal era. As the Gieses take us through the day-to-day life of burghers, we learn the customs and habits of lords and serfs, how financial transactions were conducted, how medieval cities were governed, and what life was really like for a wide range of people.

For serious students of the medieval era and anyone wishing to learn more about this fascinating period, *Life in a Medieval City* remains a timeless work of popular medieval scholarship.

Life in a Medieval City Details

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
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From Reader Review Life in a Medieval City for online ebook

D.P. Woolliscroft says

I picked this up when I saw it on Bookbub and for \$2 it's a bargain. Here is an introduction to life in a medieval city, in particular the city of Troyes, France, in the mid thirteenth century. It's easy, engaging reading with each chapter focusing on a different aspect of life (business, children, schools to name but three). There will be a plethora of interesting insights for all but the most hardened history buff.

Recommended too for lovers of medieval fantasy. I will be picking up the other books in this series, Life in a Medieval Castle and Life in a Medieval Village. Also, I think the promotional price is still valid as of the time of this writing.

Jason Koivu says

This series of medieval life books by Gies gives a solid overview of the various day-to-day happenings during the period as well as the pulse points of historically pivotal moments as they affected the Europeans of the time. It's perhaps not riveting reading for anyone other than history buffs. However, I've found it mildly entertaining and in the very least quite useful for research.

Subowal says

Medieval history is mostly about kings, barons, bishops, friars and popes. Occasionally there is a mention of the peasants, but there is very little in traditional histories about the medieval city. I consider it a pity because in my opinion medieval city is what really distinguishes Europe from Asia and the rest of the world. The city had more or less disappeared from the European scene with the fall of the roman empire, and when it re-emerged following restoration of order, its character was different. The medieval city was the preserve of traders and tradesmen - classes that didn't quite fit into the traditional hierarchy. Thanks to trade and agriculture surplus, however, the city dwellers of Europe grew rich quite fast and used their wealth to improve their social standing. They financed the endless wars of kings and nobles and leveraged it to win a measure of self-governance for the cities. They understood that their wealth came from their skill and used education to improve their skills. It was this class, with its combination of manual and conceptual skills, which ultimately ushered in the industrial revolution.

I was looking for a book dealing with the medieval city for quite some time and this one proved to be quite satisfactory. The authors use information gleaned from contemporary sources to give us a vivid picture of life in the medieval city of Troyes, France. Troyes was an important urban center as it used to hold some of the most important trade fairs of the that time. The book reads well. What I missed however is the historical evolution. This book is a snapshot of the city in the thirteenth century. It does not tell us how the institutions that defined the medieval city evolved over a period of time. I am still looking for a readable introduction to this aspect of medieval European history.

Frode says

Informative and interesting, nicely written and well documented--that's my description. This could have been a dry and lifeless book, but the Gies brothers have a knack for making the mundane come alive. The random reader will come across some terms that are unfamiliar, *chasuble*, comes to mind, but for the most part those terms apply to items common in 1250 in France but no longer in use.

The book has chapters that somewhat stand alone, so one can read a chapter and put the book aside for a while and not lose the thread of thought. There is no plot to follow; it's just a good batch of information on how folks lived in a 1250 town, Troyes. It was a market city, so the reader can find out about business in those days, contracts, how the fair was managed, the schools and books and authors, and how the church was involved. There are chapters on the theater and childbirth and doctors and town government and the typical medieval housewife.

A final chapter talks about how the changes in business and money handling led to the demise of the great fairs but became the foundation for business and enterprise in the succeeding centuries. If you would like a clear view of life in a medieval city, this is the book to read.

Laurie says

Understandably a classic of social history. I enjoyed learning that in 13th century Europe pepper was so expensive (though not the most expensive of spices available, those were saffron and cinnamon) that pepper sellers would sell individual peppercorns to housewives. Enjoyable social history centered in 13th century Troyes, France.

Karen Brooks says

This is another outstanding addition to a captivating series for any history buff or beginner historian. Taking the reader through a 'typical' medieval city, in this case Troyes in 1250, the Gies' introduce us to all aspects of everyday life throughout the year - from schools and scholars, to authors and tanners, to the famous Hot and Cold Fairs that ran for a few centuries. Discovering what people ate, wore, how they interacted, the imposition of taxes, the return to Roman Laws and courts (and the increasing importance of lawyers who were despised back then LOL!), makes for fascinating reading. As a fantasy writer, these sorts of fact-filled and page-turning books are invaluable. Highly recommended.

Robert says

As another reviewer said: "a classic of social history." Fascinating look into the beginnings, evolution and state of cities in 1250 France, specifically Troyes. The detail- from aspects of cultural attitudes; the mechanics of the churches control over all aspects of society; married life and the running of households from rich to poor, the lives of knights and burgers-all are explored here.

Well illustrated and showing the evolution of villages to towns to cities, as well as the influence of Roman laws and the effect of the Romans leaving, the city development has an organic development.

I especially liked how early versions of the city had many green spaces in the city confines that only slowly disappeared as the population expanded. I suspect that some of the green spaces we see in various cities through out Europe are remnants of these historical spaces.

Well worth reading if you like historical fiction at the least, in order to gain a sharper image of how life was lived in Medieval times and before. A standard I would imagine

C. Lee McKenzie says

There are a lot of interesting details about life in the middle ages in this book. Some chapters were more interesting than others, but I believe that's because I was in search of more of the daily lifestyle of the time, rather than the information about its institutions. Still I made note of the government and church laws as points to remember.

What I really liked was that the entire book is written in the present tense, so I often forgot I was reading about a time so long ago.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

A classic of social history, *Life in Medieval City* uses Troyes in 1250 to explore the ordinary life of the small yet prosperous bourgeois. This is an age of relative stability and wealth. The Catholic Church is the undoubted supreme power in Christendom. A system of interlocking guilds regulates the cities, and the sophistication of stone walls against the relatively crude military logistics of the age favors defenders. Troyes is situated to mediate trade between the weavers of Holland and Europe, and the great markets of the Mediterranean, with winter and summer fairs the source of the city's wealth.

It's still the Middle Ages, and if something is to be done (cooking, cleaning, crafts, farming...) it is likely to be done with backbreaking effort, but the population is on the rise and things are noticeably better than they were a hundred years ago. The dislocations of the Black Death and the Reformation are far in the future. This is a charming little book, and if scholarship has moved on since 1981, its foundational, accessible, and a steal at \$2.

Ash says

Using Troyes, a 13th century French town boasting two annual fairs, numerous aspects of medieval life across the classes are discussed highlighting the advances that separate "current" Troyes from the Dark Ages: the burgeoning of business and all of the legal and monetary advances this entails, manufacturing and construction processes, the formation/solidification of town governments, and daily life and its major moments (weddings, childbirth, funerals). Not unlucky to be born now.

"Most of the masonry work consists of old, long-practiced technique. The Romans maneuvered bigger blocks into position than any that medieval masons tackle. On the Pont du Gard there are stones eleven feet in length. But medieval masons are steadily improving their ability to handle large masses of stone. The Romans habitually built without mortar, dressing their stones accurately enough so that walls and arches stood simply by their own weight." Aaaaand now I need an overview of the Roman Empire.

Athan Tolis says

This was a Christmas gift from my son George. Expectations were guided by the one pound Sterling he paid for it at the school fair.

Boy, was I in for a surprise!

For a week of my life, this little gem of a book transported me to life in year 1250 at the city of Troyes in Champagne, France.

With no exaggeration, this voyage is a true cradle-to-grave job: you're taught how the new class of burghers (the authors avoid the word bourgeois) is delivered into the world by the midwife, schooled in the church and then perhaps at university, or alternatively how it enters an apprenticeship with one of the many new craftsmen.

This was my favorite part of the book, and a five star lesson in etymology for me too, perhaps because I'm not English. So I learned about the tanner and the fuller and the walker and what tenterhooks are too. The emergence and role of the guilds is covered very well, both from a historical and from a sociological perspective.

I also learned the proper etiquette for how a doctor should ask for compensation, which as far as I'm concerned he fully deserved, given his job entailed tasting his patients' urine for sweetness.

The weddings are covered here, the church as an institution and the cathedrals as both objects of art and feats of engineering. You get a good taste for developments in the letters (with many well-chosen and translated samples of poetry and prose) and the arts, including theater.

The whole time, moreover, you're reminded of the underlying structure in which this new class of city-dwellers was formed and (slowly) emancipated, one where power was shared between nobility and the church and only slowly and partially ceded to the ascending classes of craftsmen and moneychangers.

All of which, in turn, rested on the importance conferred to the city of Troyes by the two fairs it hosted, the "hot fair" in August and the "cold fair" in December, to which people would travel from literally the whole of Europe to trade their wares.

The guided tour through the fair is the crowning moment of the book, the point to where the authors build up over the first 200 pages, and you truly feel like you went there yourself.

I don't want to say for sure, but I think many of my dreams over the past few days were set in medieval Troyes!

Darwin8u says

"Anything written in a book has a certain sacredness, all the established authors are authorities, and all are

timeless, from Aesop to Horace."

- Joseph & Frances Gies

A nice survey of Troyes in 1250 AD. Joseph and Frances Gies examine everything from medicine to women to the church and cathedrals in Medieval Europe, focusing their historical lense on Troyes, which at the time was a prosperous center of commerce in Europe. Not super deep, but VERY interesting with some great nuggets. This book is written for general readership and seems to always jump to the next chapter just as soon as my interest was piqued. Here is a list of the chapters/subjects:

* Prologue

1. Troyes: 1250
2. A Burgher's Home
3. A Medieval Housewife
4. Childbirth and Children
5. Weddings and Funerals
6. Small Business
7. Big Business
8. The Doctor
9. The Church
10. The Cathedral
11. School and Scholars
12. Books and Authors
13. The New Theatre
14. Disasters
15. Town Government
16. The Champagne Fair

* After 1250

Oleksandr says

Yet another element of the puzzle called Middle Ages is *Life in a Medieval City*, a book by historians Frances and Joseph Gies. The place is Troyes, the historical capital of Champagne, a region to the east of Paris. The year is 1250 when the county was ruled by Thibaut (Theobald) IV who was a poet, an admirer of the French Queen and a crusader.

Since the Dark Ages, Troyes was a bishopric and one of the largest cities in Northwestern Europe. Standing on the crossroads of trading routes, Troyes became an important fair city. One of the proofs for this status is that it was among ten French cities which held an international fair and Troyes held them twice a year! It lay half-way between Flanders and Italy, the biggest supplier and the biggest investor of that age. The first fair took place in summer and the second in the beginning of winter, and these were not basic buy-sale relationships. Even then, capitalism in a certain form existed, as well as loans, insurance, and reselling of debt obligations. At the fair, everything was sold including treats for your stomach and treats for your flesh, products from petty farmers and manufactured goods from Flemish textile merchants. But what always occupied the throne is spices. One of the contemporaries listed 288 kinds of spices, some of which were worth their weight in gold – figuratively if not literally.

(view spoiler)

What is Life in a Medieval City? It is a part of the trilogy about the city, village, and castle of that time. Why Troyes? Medieval France exceeded other countries in territory and population, it was an obvious thing to write about the French since their history reached our age in numerous documents. Paris is well-studied so the Gies chose the nearest large city which was Troyes. Why is 1250 so important? Troyes is on the edge of its glory and decline. The fairs still play a significant part in the life of the society but the first signs of the New Age appear. It is still far away but it will gain the victory. How would I sum it up? It's pure non-fiction. As always, everything's based on scientific sources. It was a light reading and you can find a lot of interesting here.

Carole says

This book was a very comprehensive and interesting exploration of Troyes (in France) during the year 1250 and a little before and after that year. City life was amazingly complicated and active at that time. Although the exact nature of materials and how work was done was very different from contemporary Chicago, all the issues and aims were readily identifiable.

I enjoyed the book a great deal. Here are two bits I loved:

In describing the merchants' and others' declining interest in funding Crusades, a subject near to the hearts of many contemporary Americans regarding our now never-ending wars, the authors wrote:

"It is hardly surprising that quite a few burghers identify themselves with the wrong side of the debate between Crusaders and non-Crusaders that is a favorite subject of the *trouvères*. They feel that after all, 'it is also a good and holy thing to live quietly at home, in friendship with neighbors, taking care of children and goods, going to bed early and sleeping well.' If the sultan of Egypt should take it into his head to invade France, they will be ready to pay an aid, and take up their pikes and crossbows besides. But they do not see the wisdom of journeying far over the sea to die, and die expensively at that."

As I read I kept thinking about how familiar some descriptions of lifestyle, business, and government felt to me. A couple of times I found myself flashing on one scene or another from "Game of Thrones." Imagine my delight in reading the following in the afterword of the book:

"Life in a Medieval City" [was] identified by George R. R. Martin as primary sources for his Song of Ice and Fire series, the basis of the Game of Thrones television series."

So cool. And now I plan to read "Life in a Medieval Castle," too. This is the kind of history I enjoy, the kind where war is not the only thing worth documenting!

Debbie says

"Life in a Medieval City" is an educational nonfiction book. It covered all aspects of city life in the 12th and 13th centuries in Europe. The focus was mainly on what life was like in Troyes, France, but the authors also compared Troyes to various other European cities.

The content was technical (as in, serious research rather than interesting trivia), but the writing wasn't dry. I liked the depth of information and the quotes from documents written at that time. There were some black and white photos, illustrations, and maps (including one of Troyes in 1250 A.D.).

The book covered what a burgher's home was like, what life was like for the housewife, childbirth and children, weddings and funerals, small and large businesses, the doctor, the church, the cathedral, schools and scholars, books and authors (and poets), theater, disasters (including flood, famine, plagues, and war), how the town government worked, and the Champagne Fairs held in Troyes and other towns.

Overall, I found this book very interesting and informative. I'd recommend it to anyone wanting to know the details about what life was like in a European city in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Cynda says

I found this book readable and informative. Because this a book by -good- amatter historians, the writing is essential stilted and more readable, something like reading a well-written historical fiction book.

SlowRain says

It took me three starts over many years, but I finally got around to finishing this book. It's very informative, and great for people just starting out with the Middle Ages. The main theme running throughout the novel was the fairs. However, I'd say this wasn't a strong enough narrative thread to pull me along. It could've been better written, but it is what it is--a very good place to start.

Ryan Castner says

This book was recommended by my Western Civ professor. I found the reading rather tedious at times and would recommend skipping the introduction entirely as it is just a fact dump that has no context to keep up with. Each chapter was organized as a focus on a certain topic, the cathedrals, the markets, the burghers, the home. This sorting made sense from an organization perspective, but it left the book feeling rather disjoint, almost like separate wikipedia entries. All this being said, it was full of information and worth a read if this is topic of interest to you.

Hedlun says

I came across this in our basement, it was from one of Stephanie's classes at Alma College. Fairly interesting and quick read. I liked how it was organized by topic: A Medieval Housewife, Small Business, The Doctor, and Disasters to name a few. Most interesting to me were A Burgher's Home and The Doctor. This book gave me a greater appreciation for how difficult life was and included details that get glossed over in even the best literature and film on this period.

Craig Becker says

Interesting read

I enjoyed this book on medieval living. Having really only a touch on the age in school, then zillions of fantasy books is nice to see a bit of reality tossed on top. Really wish they had freshened the pictures, seemed unfocused, and splitting the maps in two really only works in a bound book. A little tiresome in spots, but easy to read and some fun interesting descriptions. Boo to the publishers for the poor illustrations and a number of glaring misspellings.
