

The urban horse: equestrian traffic and horse husbandry in late medieval cities

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Doctoral thesis: Interurban mobility and traffic networks in the Late Middle Ages with special emphasis on equestrian traffic from a comparative perspective

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Just like cattle, sheep and pigs, horses were part of the still agrarian influenced late medieval townscapes. Written and iconographic sources as well as archaeological evidence give proof of the extensive presence of horses inside and outside the city walls and their indispensability for urban and interurban communication and mobility.

Since the thriving of European cities in the High Middle Ages, there was an increasing demand for faster and more reliable exchange services comparable with those in the Roman Empire: after the decline of the well-developed and regularly maintained Roman road network, circulation of people, goods and services had become less effective, particularly given that carriage traffic was virtually impossible on deteriorated roads. Consequently, equestrian traffic gained more importance in the medieval period, as much in long-distance travels as in shorter day's journeys. In order to facilitate urban mobility and communication between cities, traffic policies were developed, which consisted of road works, institutionally controlled mounted courier services and provision of courier horses, as well as travel allowances and travel horses for hire. In addition, the authorities adopted decrees which regulated animal waste disposal and corpse removal to guarantee a hygienic living environment for both humans and animals. At the same time specialized systems and structures for urban horse husbandry arose, e. g. stables for mounts of the city authorities and distinguished guests; on the other side, horse rental stations for the middle class emerged in the late 15th century.

The paper displays the characteristics, capacities and limitations of urban equestrian traffic and horse husbandry in the Late Middle Ages and presents the importance and impact of the human-horse relationship in the urban environment. Pragmatic documents such as (travel) account books and legal texts were used as primary source base alongside municipal chronicles; they were analyzed using a comparative and quantitative methodology. In addition, reflections of the urban horse in material culture are also considered in order to emphasize a more dynamic dimension of the phenomenon. To conclude, the value of the urban horse either as a daily companion or as a mere commodity in medieval townscapes is discussed.