

Medieval cities not so different from modern European cities, according to study

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Credit: Santa Fe Institute

Medieval cities – with their agrarian societies and simple market economies – seem very different from modern European urban centers. Life in 14th-century cities centered around hierarchical institutions such as the crown, guilds, and churches. Today, companies, technologies, and a global economy dominate our lives.

Despite the dramatic changes in economic and political structures over the last 700 years, a new look at medieval cities' population sizes and distributions suggest that some urban characteristics have remained remarkably consistent.

A paper published this week in *PLOS One*, co-authored by SFI Professor Luis Bettencourt, External Professor Scott Ortman, and colleagues,

highlights one major similarity: in both medieval and modern European cities, larger settlements have higher population densities than smaller cities.

The authors write: "This would suggest that the institutions of Western European urban systems ca. 1300 did not substantially constrain social mixing, economic integration, or the free flow of people, ideas, and information."

In short, the social dynamics enabled by medieval cities were fundamentally similar to those of contemporary cities.

The authors analyzed data from 173 medieval cities from across Western Europe, finding that these data show statistically indistinguishable community grouping patterns among medieval capital cities in Italy, England, France, and Belgium and much younger European cities.

On the macro, institutional level, modern and historical cities may look very different, says Bettencourt. We are now finding that what we know about contemporary urban processes may be applicable to the past because of similarities in micro-level behaviors and the effects they have on the larger system, he says.

More information: Rudolf Cesaretti et al. Population-Area Relationship for Medieval European Cities, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0162678](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0162678)

Provided by Santa Fe Institute

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