

Gender in the European Town: Medieval to Modern: Conference Report

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The very successful conference on Gender in the European Town: Medieval to Modern, held at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, 22-25 May 2013, brought together scholars from all over Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa. The conference had a truly pan-European focus as well as a broad chronological scope; particularly noteworthy was the strong presence of research on gender in the Nordic countries. This provided an unparalleled opportunity for those researchers working in different languages to gain access to the exciting research being carried out in these regions.

After pre-conference workshops for postgraduates, the conference proper began late Wednesday afternoon with a plenary talk from Deborah Simonton, the principal conference organiser, on gender and civic identity in eighteenth-century Aberdeen. Debbi's talk ranged widely and provided an excellent introduction to the three main strands of the conference: civic identity, space, and economic life.

This was followed by three days of concurrent sessions of conference papers, organised into the three main strands. Each day began with a plenary talk which addressed an aspect of gender in the European town. Rachel Fuchs discussed gender, the family and the courts in modern Paris and demonstrated the complexities caused by a society which championed the language of universal rights while at the same time passing gender-specific legislation. She also showed how women used the courts to exercise citizenship rights normally denied to them. Indeed, the theme of women's agency in the face of legal and other obstacles was one which emerged throughout the conference. Pamela Sharpe in her talk on early modern economic and social perspectives used the case study of Hester Pinney (1658-1740), English lace seller and financier, to show how women could carve out extremely successful careers for themselves in their own right. Elizabeth Cohen discussed early modern Rome and illustrated the roles that women could carve out for themselves in a city dominated by men.

The panel sessions offered a rich variety of topics from which to choose. One could focus on one particular strand, but the overlapping aspects of the strands meant that even panels not particularly identified with one strand had something to contribute to that theme. For example Gender and Space in the Urban Economy had as much to say about space as about the economy. This overlap worked very well as it brought together historians with different interests rather than encouraging them to follow one strand only. A poster session on Friday afternoon also contributed to the diversity of topics and approaches. The quality of the individual contributions was very high. Delicious lunches each day provided time to reflect on the papers and to meet with other participants and establish new networks and connections.

Some of the themes which emerged from the sessions I attended included the economic centrality of women's activities, the ways in which space both dictated activities but was ascribed functions by the community, the importance of female networks of support, the issue of female agency and the role of patriarchy, understandings of what was meant by the household, the role of violence, and new research on masculinities. Similar themes emerged from studies of all periods and all countries, facilitating valuable cross-cultural comparisons. One particularly interesting and lively debate was about the public/private divide, and whether or not these terms had outlived their usefulness to historians.

The conference also included a celebration of the achievements of the Gender in the European Town project as it reaches the end of its first phase. A book launch in the spectacular historical library beside the Odense Cathedral for the new essay collection *Female Agency in the Urban Economy Gender in European Towns 1640-1830* eds Deborah Simonton and Anne Montenach (Routledge, 2013) on Thursday evening highlighted the many accomplishments of the members of the project, including several books. It is to be hoped that the project will continue. This conference certainly demonstrated the strength and vitality of the field.