Family, lineage and dynasty in the late medieval city: Re-thinking the English evidence

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One of the many books produced by William Caxton's printing press was an English translation of a collection of Latin maxims. Known by the abbreviated title of *Cato*, the book was first published by Caxton in 1476 and printed twice more before Caxton made his own translation of a French version of the original Latin text in early 1484.[2] Caxton's translation had a new prologue, which the three previous editions had lacked. Dedicated to the city of London, Caxton's preface lamented London's economic decline and the poor prospects of young Londoners.[3] Children born within the city were not prospering like their fathers and elders; however generous their paternal inheritance, once they reached adulthood, only two in ten were able to take advantage of their good start in life. Although he had 'sene and knowen in other londes in dyuerse cytees that of one name and lygnage successyuely haue endured prosperously many heyres', some for 500 or 600 years and some for 1,000 years, these lineages could barely 'contynue vnto the thyrd heyr or scarcely to the second' in the 'noble cyte of london'. This historical divergence saddened Caxton and was not easy to explain. He knew no city where children were more fortunate, wise or eloquent in their youth *and* where most were of limited ability when they became adults.

Caxton's commercial instincts should not be ignored.[4] He had a book to sell and an audience to cultivate. Throughout the Middle Ages *Cato* was used as a school book to deliver moral guidance and to teach Latin. Caxton was sure that there were many who could surpass their fathers in wisdom and wealth; and he expressed his hope that, should they read the book and absorb its precepts, then they would be better able to 'rewle them self'. Caxton calculated that the language of the 'common profit' had an allure and utility.[5] Caxton was a London

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[2] For the different editions, see *Catalogue of Books printed in the XVth Century now in the British Library, Part 11: England*, ed. L. Hellinga ('t Goy-Houten, 2007), 133–4, 150–1.

[3] For what follows, see *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, ed. W.J.B. Crotch (Early English Text Society, original series, 176, 1929), 76–8.

[4] A. Taylor, 'Authors, scribes, patrons and books', in J. Wogan-Browne *et al.* (eds.), *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (Exeter, 1999), 364–5.

[5] D. Harry, 'William Caxton and commemorative culture in fifteenth-century England', in L. Clark (ed.), *Exploring the Evidence: Commemoration, Administration and the Economy* (Woodbridge, 2014), 63–80.

freeman, and his fellow citizens would buy this self-help book only if they were extended the promise of betterment and if they felt that moral improvement would lead to worldly success. His market was a mirror to his own social ambitions.

Yet if the prologue sought to persuade and to exhort, if the notion of 'decline' was a conventional literary topos and if Caxton's assertion of the longevity of urban lineages overseas sounds fanciful, even fantastical, his opinions were grounded in personal experience. Of the unnamed 'dyuerse cytees' in 'other londes' that he had encountered on his travels, it is probable that he had in mind Bruges, Ghent and Cologne. These were the cities, other than London, with which he was best acquainted. A London mercer and merchant adventurer, Caxton was elected governor of the Merchant Adventurers in 1462 and, based at Bruges, he was the official representative of English merchants in the Low Countries throughout the decade. In the early 1470s he resided in Ghent and Cologne, after which he returned briefly to Ghent and Bruges, before setting up a printing press at Westminster.[6]

Caxton's observations have also found support in the work of several generations of twentieth-century urban historians, which has advanced two central claims: that 'urban dynasties' in late medieval England very rarely survived beyond two or three generations; and that the absence of dynasties was a fundamental difference between English and continental towns. This article argues that the assumptions about urban dynasties in both England and continental Europe are misleading. It first considers how and why they became engrained in the historiography of English towns, with the result that historians have not paid enough attention to the social and familial roots of elite identity and power. Secondly, it explains that continuing debate among scholars of urban continental Europe about the existence of patriciates has made more urgent the need to define the role and nature of lineages. When William Caxton wrote wistfully that he had 'sene and knowen in other londes in dyuerse cytees that of one name and lygnage successyuely haue endured prosperously many heyres', what kinds of family structures was he observing or imagining? 'The question of the definition of lineage', as Jack Goody sagely counselled, 'influences what is to be explained and the kind of explanation to be offered'.[7] In the third section, I outline a new research agenda for the study of English urban elites and demonstrate the rich, and mostly

[6] A.F. Sutton, 'William Caxton, king's printer c. 1480–85: a plea for history and chronology in a merchant's career', in C.M. Barron and A.F. Sutton (eds.), *The Medieval Merchant* (Donington, 2014), 259–83. On Caxton's stay in the Low Countries, where he had his first printing workshop, see R. Adam, 'Printing books in Bruges in the fifteenth century', in E. Hauwaerts *et al.* (eds.), *Colard Mansion: Incunabula, Prints and Manuscripts in Medieval Bruges* (Ghent, 2018), 53–61.

[7] J. Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983), 231.

untapped, potential of the English sources. Behind the issue of whether urban dynasties were absent in late medieval England and present in many continental European cities is the wider subject of elite reproduction, from the biological and legal to the material, visual and textual. How, why, with what success and with what consequences did urban elites reproduce themselves?

English exceptionalism?

While Caxton identified the problem as one of personal conduct, which was best remedied through moral instruction, post-war historians such as Sylvia Thrupp argued that high rates of child mortality, coupled with the attraction of the countryside to an upwardly mobile mercantile class, prevented dynastic reproduction and frustrated father-to-son succession in late medieval London.[8] To W.G. Hoskins, movement from town to country among provincial merchants made it impossible for leading urban families to set down deep roots in the places where they had made their fortune. Mortality and migration brought about the failure of English urban dynasties. Hoskins noted that 'a general feature of the social and economic history of English towns' was 'the remarkable constancy with which successful urban families came and went in a matter of three generations at the most'.[9] Writing in the late 1970s, Carl Hammer declared, 'It is generally accepted that medieval urban dynasties did not, normally, last beyond three generations in town.'[10] His proof was Sylvia Thrupp's chapter on London aldermanic families. The thesis had already become incontrovertible fact. Over twenty years later, Peter Fleming could state, succinctly and uncontroversially, that 'enduring concentrations of power within urban dynasties were rare' in late medieval England.[11] Dynastic instability had repercussions for the collective character of the ruling groups of English cities. 'No merchant patrician class ever formed in the English towns', was Hoskins' confident pronouncement.[12] If the comparison with continental Europe was implicit in Hoskins' account, it was formulated explicitly in Colin Platt's 1976 survey of *The English*

[8] S.L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300–1500]* (Chicago, 1948), ch. 5, esp. 191–206.
[9] W.G. Hoskins, 'English provincial towns in the early 16th century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1956), 1–19. The quotation is at p. 8.
[10] C.I. Hammer, 'The Oxford town council in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', *Journal of British Studies*, 18 (1978), 19.
[11] P. Fleming, 'Telling tales of oligarchy in the late medieval town', in M. Hicks (ed.), *Revolution and Consumption in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2001), 178.
[12] Hoskins, 'English provincial towns', 19.

Medieval Town: English towns did not see 'the creation of urban patriciates on lines familiar on the Continent'.[13]

Only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the social, economic and political status of wealthy urban families was based upon the stability provided by the possession of land, did office have a proprietary quality and were the topography of urban neighbourhoods and the configuration of property boundaries shaped by the controlling interests of several notable and long-lasting dynasties. Patrician families owned urban manors and they monopolized and retained office over generations in cities such as Southampton, York and London.[14] Some historians contest even this picture. Can there be confidence in the correct name-linkage in a period when urban records are neither as varied nor as voluminous as they are for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? 'The evidence for London', Susan Reynolds cautioned, is 'less good than it once appeared: most of the "patrician dynasties" rest on rather optimistic identifications, while the proportion of aldermen who actually belonged to such "dynasties" is not yet established – nor, perhaps, ever could be.'[15] The social composition of town government in England and continental Europe was perhaps different from the very beginning, from the making of urban communes.

Thrupp interpreted William Caxton's belief in the fragility of dynasties in London as confirmation of a 'peculiarly English' phenomenon.[16] Dynastic weakness was an English malaise. Was Caxton correct about English towns? Were there really cities in continental Europe where lineages had lasted without interruption for 500 or 600 years, some for even 1,000 years? It is unlikely. But that Caxton thought so, or thought that others would concur, is interesting and important because his words have served as historical endorsement of a long-recognized and pervasive historiographical fault-line, the metanarrative of English exceptionalism.

The model of dynastic difference has been persuasive because it correlated with enduring ideas not only about the essential differences between English and continental towns but about a larger process of historical divergence between England and the Continent,

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[13] C. Platt, *The English Medieval Town* (London, 1976), 98–9.
[14] C. Platt, *Medieval Southampton: The Port and Trading Community, A.D. 1000–1600* (London, 1973), chs. 5–6; S. Rees Jones, *York: The Making of a City, 1068–1530* (Oxford, 2013), 186–207; G.A. Williams, *Medieval London: From Commune to Capital* (London, 1963), 32–3, 50–75, 310–11.
[15] S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1997), 209–10. See also J. McEwan, 'The aldermen of London, c.1200–80: Alfred Beaven revisited', *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, 62 (2017), 186–7.
[16] Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 228.

of which the fragility of urban dynasties was both the manifestation and cause: England's precocious political centralization and early economic modernization. In late medieval England, sons did not always follow their fathers into trade and successful migrants did not feel a strong emotional bond to the urban place; they preferred what country and court life had to offer.[17] Cities other than London were 'smaller, poorer and far less independent' than those on the Continent.[18] England was a regnal polity, in which government was highly centralized and in which landownership and royal service were the conduits of power. While in England the nobility lived on their estates in the countryside, in Italy they resided in the cities. In the northern and central parts of the Italian peninsula there was a distinctly urban nobility, whose power-base lay in the heart of the city, where they built towers and palaces and dominated urban government until they were challenged by the appearance of the *popolo* in the middle decades of the thirteenth century.[19] Townspeople in England were monarchical subjects. Elsewhere in late medieval Europe they were urban citizens.

The susceptibility of English urban elites to the lure of the countryside and their inability to reproduce themselves beyond two or three generations stimulated high levels of social mobility. English urban elites could never be closed groups: they had to incorporate outsiders. Unlike the distinction between the *magnati* and *popolani* in Italian cities, the social and political boundaries between 'elite' and 'popular' groups in England were porous, class identities were less rigid, social mobility was attainable so long as individuals had wealth and ambition and newcomers could rise up the urban hierarchy relatively easily. 'London', in Barbara Hanawalt's words, 'was not an aristocratic city, but one of merchants and traders'; London's merchants prioritized the circulation of wealth and the expansion of their personal capital over desire to keep property within the male line of the family.[20] Yet, paradoxically, this entrepreneurial disposition enabled the socially ambitious in English cities to escape their urban origins and to join the ranks of the gentry and the nobility. They called themselves gentlemen, bought rural manors, appropriated heraldic arms and tried to marry their children

[17] Platt, *English Medieval Town*, 102.
[18] A. Cowan, 'Urban elites in early modern Europe: an endangered species?', *Historical Research*, 64 (1991), 133.
[19] G. Castelnuovo, *Être noble dans la cité. Les noblesses italiennes en quête d'identité (XIII^e–XV^e siècle)* (Paris, 2014), part 1; C. Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton, 1991).
[20] B.A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford, 1993), 107; B.A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford, 2007), 209.

into the landowning class.[21] William de la Pole was a fourteenth-century wool merchant from Hull; his son became the earl of Suffolk before the end of the century.[22] It has been hard to resist what the Italian medievalist Sandro Carocci has called 'the entrenched myth of the fluidity of English society' because the idea is so closely associated with an equally powerful 'national narrative' about the 'English origins of modernisation', which perceived a causal connection between social mobility, entrepreneurial attitudes and the Industrial Revolution.[23]

The argument about the shallow depth of civic culture in late medieval England, which supposedly induced the flight from towns among successful urban families, does not stand on secure foundations. English cities may have been subject cities rather than autonomous city-states, but so too were cities such as Bruges and Ghent, which may have resisted the political ambitions of the dukes of Burgundy in the fifteenth century, but which still had to negotiate their position within a ducal polity. William Caxton's translation of the *Distichs of Cato* was an act of personal devotion to the city of London, which he revered as 'noble auncyent and renommed' [i.e. renowned]. Caxton was not only a mercer but a citizen and sworn member ('coniurye') of London's community of freemen; reiterating the words that he had said in his freeman's oath, he confided that he was obliged by his 'dute' to do all that was in his power 'to assiste ayde & counceille' the city. Although the city was a corporate body, an artificial entity, Caxton's sentiments were as natural and familial as his attachment to his mother, to whom he owed a debt of gratitude for his upbringing ('of whom I haue receyued my noureture & lyuynge').[24] English provincial towns also had their attractions to townsmen, who judged the urban stage a more than adequate arena for the projection of a specifically urban mode of gentility.[25]

In identifying the values and norms of this 'urban gentry', historians might better understand the stratification of English urban society. Research on the relationship between 'family' and 'class' is marked by conceptual inconsistencies. The conviction that they were mutually supportive social ties is contradicted by scholars who see 'family' and 'class' as antithetical forces. The difficulty of dynastic formation ensured the 'fluidity' of London's class structure, and in the Somerset town of Wells, it was the 'weakness of the élite family,

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[21] A.D. Dyer, *The City of Worcester in the Sixteenth Century* (Leicester, 1973), 180–1, 186.
[22] P. Nightingale, 'Knights and merchants: trade, politics and the gentry in late medieval England', *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), 61.
[23] S. Carocci, 'Social mobility and the Middle Ages', *Continuity and Change*, 26 (2011), 371–2.
[24] *Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, 77.
[25] R. Horrox, 'The urban gentry in the fifteenth century', in J.A.F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), 22–44.

the rarity of sons succeeding father', which 'helped to make Wells's oligarchy more open and benign than those in Italy, for instance'.[26] To Jacques Heers, whose rejection of Marxist theories of class, class consciousness and class conflict was every bit as dogmatic as the antagonistic model of social relations he denounced, the family was a major source of social cohesion and stability.[27] By the same logic, in cities where dynasties were 'short-lived', class became more visible and its claims more insistent. Writing about the merchants of three Yorkshire towns – York, Beverley and Hull – Jennifer Kermode contended that the vulnerability of individual families was the cause of the reproduction of class. Elite families intermarried not to preserve the family name, but to shore up their collective power as a ruling 'class'.[28] At the risk of conceptual confusion, David Nicholas argued that the merchant group as a social class in English cities 'became a kind of extended kinship pool'.[29]

Application of the concept of 'class' to describe and analyse urban social structure is itself problematic.[30] Although the British Marxist historian Rodney Hilton thought that contemporary rhetoric barely disguised the social reality of a sharp hierarchy of wealth and power, late medieval cities had their own vocabulary of social place, which reflected the peculiarity of urban conditions. Those who ruled towns were the *probi homines* and the *bons hommes* (good men and worthy men) or, in the comparative forms that were more emphatic statements of social superiority, the *potentes* or *meliores* (the powerful or better).[31] The language of 'status' inspired historians of German cities, among them Erich Maschke, who employed a geological metaphor of social gradation. Cities were divided into multiple 'layers' or 'strata' (*Schichten*) rather than dichotomous social classes; an individual's place was the consequence not of the nature of a family's resources and type of income, but of his or her level of wealth. Those of the highest status were an 'elite'. The *Oberschicht* (upper stratum) was a 'ruling elite' or 'elite group' (*Elitegruppe*).[32] Historians have had their

[26] Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, ch. 5; D.G. Shaw, *The Creation of a Community: The City of Wells in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), 173.
[27] J. Heers, *Family Clans in the Middle Ages: A Study of Political and Social Structures in Urban Areas* (Amsterdam, 1977), 6, 248.
[28] J. Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1998), 308, 319.
[29] D. Nicholas, *Urban Europe 1100–1700* (Basingstoke, 2003), 127.
[30] For a recent call to engage once more with 'class', see J. Fynn-Paul, 'Let's talk about class: towards an institutionalist typology of class relations in the cities of pre-modern Europe (c. 1200–c. 1800)', *Urban History*, 41 (2014), 582–605.
[31] R. Hilton, 'Status and class in the medieval town', in T.R. Slater and G. Rosser (eds.), *The Church in the Medieval Town* (Aldershot, 1998), 12–13.
[32] E. Maschke, 'Die Schichtung der mittelalterlichen Stadtbevölkerung als Problem der Forschung', originally published in 1973 and reprinted in E. Maschke (ed.), *Städte und Menschen. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Stadt, der Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft 1959–1977* (Wiesbaden, 1980), 162–6.

reservations about the term ‘elite’ because of its conceptual vagueness and intellectual blandness and because, like the word ‘class’, it is absent from the written sources of late medieval cities, whether in Latin or in the vernacular. The concept has merit because its active quality matched the dynamic character of urban society, in which social groups were able to define themselves as well as be defined by others.[33] Elite status could be determined by subjective as well as objective criteria; power was not always anchored to the holding of office and social hierarchies were not static. It remains to be asked how English urban elites were an ‘elite’, what distinguished them from other groups within urban society, how they conceived themselves and represented themselves, and how they were regarded by others.[34] We might add that a person could be a member of the ‘elite’ by virtue of his family’s longevity.[35]

In England, and in other areas of late medieval Europe, the subject of family history has been largely the domain of historians of the rural nobility. Italy is the exception in this respect, as we shall see. Simon Teuscher’s assessment in 2007 that, ‘While kinship has become an important topic among students of the late medieval nobility, it is only reluctantly discussed by historians dealing with the period’s urban societies’, still holds true.[36] The failure to develop the concept of an ‘urban gentry’ is striking. If London’s merchants neither aspired to emulate an aristocratic lifestyle through participation in tournaments and the bearing of heraldic arms, nor shared the chivalric reading habits of the landed classes,[37] are we to imagine that English urban elites thought about their families differently from their rural counterparts?

English landed families, seeking to defend, articulate and assert their honour and reputation, were intensely anxious about ancestry, blood and succession. Their fears crystallized around the concept of ‘lineage’. Lineage had temporal and spatial dimensions,

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[33] P. Monnet, ‘Zwischen Reproduktion und Repräsentation. Formierungsprozesse von Eliten in westeuropäischen Städten des Spätmittelalters: Terminologie, Typologie, Dynamik’, in E. Gruber *et al.* (eds.), *Städte im lateinischen Westen und im griechischen Osten zwischen Spätantike und Früher Neuzeit* (Vienna, 2016), 177, 179, 180.

[34] For one attempt, see C.E. Carpenter: ‘The formation of urban élites: civic officials in late-medieval York 1476–1525’, University of York D.Phil. thesis, 2000. Historians of German cities have pursued this agenda much more rigorously: B. Studt, ‘Erinnerung und Identität. Die Repräsentation städtischer Eliten in spätmittelalterlichen Haus- und Familienbüchern’, in B. Studt (ed.), *Haus- und Familienbücher in der Städtischen Gesellschaft des Spätmittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne, 2007), 1–31.

[35] J.F. Padgett, ‘Open elite? Social mobility, marriage, and family in Florence, 1282–1494’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 63 (2010), 380.

[36] S. Teuscher, ‘Politics of kinship in the city of Bern at the end of the Middle Ages’, in D.W. Sabean *et al.* (eds.), *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)* (New York, 2007), 76.

[37] C. Barron, ‘Chivalry, pageantry and merchant culture in medieval London’, in P. Coss and M. Keen (eds.), *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2002), 219–41.

which came together in the idea of 'stewardship', the 'notion that the head of the family was no more than the temporary owner of property, for which he had to answer to the past and future of his line'.[38] This idea fuelled the assembling of noble family archives and the craze for genealogy, and underpinned intricate tenurial arrangements, the ramifications of which could be felt for generations.[39] The sense of lineage, and attachment to place, Christine Carpenter argued, was more potent among the upper aristocracy (the nobility) than among the lesser aristocracy (the gentry); it also stretched further back in time and was more capacious among the nobility. There was a variety of legal devices available to English landowners to preserve the family patrimony and to avert the danger of extinction, from the entail to the enfeoffment to use, but it was only in the later fifteenth century that Warwickshire gentry turned in greater numbers to the settlement in tail male. It was the nobility, too, who remembered the titles, lands, marriage alliances and endowments of their multi-faceted inheritance.[40] By contrast, the gentry's scale of operation was much smaller, and its territorial focus could change quickly as estates, accumulated in a piecemeal fashion through marriage or purchase, dilated and contracted. An English gentry family's conception of lineage was acute and ostentatious, but present-centred and temporary.[41]

In Carpenter's view, it was only the social climbers, many of whom were of urban origins, whose consciousness of family extended deeper. They were desperate to manufacture an ancient lineage, evinced 'an exaggerated reverence for their own or others' ancestors' and strove to protect the family name.[42] Robert Calle, a grocer from the small market town of Framlingham in Norfolk, belonged to 'the shop-keeping classes' and exemplified 'the unusual concern with lineage' among this social group.[43] When Calle made his will in 1520, he left his shop and his house in Framlingham marketplace, successively, to his wife, his son and his male heirs. If this line were to die out, the two properties were to be sold at a reduced

[38] C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge, 1992), 245.
[39] *Ibid.*, ch. 7.
[40] *Ibid.*, 252, 255–6; C. Carpenter, 'The fifteenth-century English gentry and their estates', in M. Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986), 54. For the legal devices, see S.J. Payling, 'Social mobility, demographic change, and landed society in late medieval England', *Economic History Review*, new series, 45 (1992), 52–3.
[41] Carpenter, 'Fifteenth-century English gentry', 55.
[42] Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, 257.
[43] *Ibid.*, 253 n.40.

price to one of his 'nexte of kin bearing of the name of Callys', and they were to stay 'in the name of Callys in the issue male for ever while any of the said stock is alive'.[44]

How typical was Robert Calle's 'dynastic pride' among the urban elites of late medieval England?[45] Did others share his belief in the insoluble bond between the family home and the family name, and to what lengths did merchants go to maintain it? What did the surname mean to its holder, and whose surname? Individual cases are suggestive. The fourteenth-century goldsmith and four-time mayor of London Nicholas le Fevre adopted the surname of William Farndon, another London goldsmith, on his marriage to William's daughter and heir. In turn, Nicholas's daughter and heir married twice, and the sons of both marriages took on the surname of 'Farndon'.[46] When William, the son of the London merchant Sir John Pulteney, died in 1367 without a direct heir, the son of John's sister acquired the family property and the name of 'Pulteney'.[47] In these instances, the matrilineage was more meaningful than the patrilineage, but the surname continued. Over a century later, William Albon, a merchant of Great Yarmouth, made his will and divided the third part of his moveable property between his children, in accordance with a custom known as 'legitim', which was common in English cities such as York and London.[48] Some historians have proposed that the prevalence of this borough custom, which diminished the amount of inter-generational capital transmissible to the male heir, was one of the structural explanations for the absence of English merchant dynasties.[49] More significantly, William Albon did not adhere to the practice of partible inheritance in the dispersal of his real estate. Although he had daughters, he bequeathed to his son Robert his 'place' – his residence – in Great Yarmouth, property on the other side of the river Yare and land along the Norfolk coast. Robert was not yet twenty-one and was still a minor. William stated his wish that his son should go to school 'till he haue competent vnderstonding in gramer', after which his executors were to make sure that he was apprenticed in a trade. There was no uncertainty about where Robert stood in the pecking order of siblings. Robert was to 'be largely proferred be for [i.e. before] my doughters by the discrecion of myne executours to the sustentacion of the name'. His welfare was to be given priority over that of his sisters, for the perpetuation of

[44] These extracts from the will are taken from C. Richmond, 'The Pastons revisited: marriage and the family in fifteenth-century England', *Historical Research*, 58 (1985), 34.
[45] The quotation is from *ibid.*
[46] Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 339.
[47] *Ibid.*, 362.
[48] For 'legitim', see Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 293.
[49] *Ibid.*, 303, 308. See also Dyer, *City of Worcester*, 180.

the family name, and he was to live up to the promise of that name in virtue, wisdom and manners ('good condicions'). His inheritance, in 1498, was dependent upon it.[50] Were concerns about the loss of the family name what motivated Robert Holme senior, a fourteenth-century merchant and mayor of York who died without a surviving legitimate child, to leave his substantial estate to his illegitimate son Robert? Or, ten years later, in 1406, were they in the mind of Robert senior's brother, Thomas, who made his nephew Thomas his heir, so that, while the direct line came to an end, the Holmes family could carry on in the male line?[51] These examples may be no more than a family of resemblance, but they recall the testamentary strategies adopted by resourceful members of Marseille's ruling elite in the same period.[52]

Historians of English towns have preferred the term 'dynasty' to 'lineage' and concluded that leading townspeople were unable to establish dynasties. This is to assume that urban elites thought dynastically. The concept of 'dynasty', with its connotations of rulership and princely power, was not necessarily applicable in an urban context.[53] Princely rules of succession, which obeyed the principle of primogeniture, favoured single lines of descent, but there were other means to prolong the family.[54] When John Padgett tried to compare the fortunes of Florentine lineages with those in other parts of Europe, he had recourse to K.B. McFarlane's figures on the higher English nobility. Comparative analysis was not straightforward, he conceded, because McFarlane 'used the primogeniture criterion of continuous, unbroken male descent, appropriate for dynastic families, rather than the criterion of any male descendant used here' and in other studies of Florence.[55] It is all the more curious that Colin Platt did not distinguish between 'direct' heirs, descending from father to son, and descent in the male line broadly defined, when he observed that there was 'a consistent failure of heirs' in English towns.[56] Thrupp's study notwithstanding,[57] there has been a lack of clarity. Robert Gottfried's research on the elite families of Bury St. Edmunds, cited approvingly to support the argument for dynastic impermanence, shows how one prominent

[50] The National Archives (TNA), PROB 11/11/414.
[51] For these examples, see Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 79, 307.
[52] C. Maurel, 'Un artifice contre l'extinction des familles? La substitution de nom et d'armes à Marseille (fin XIV^{e} siècle – fin XVI^{e} siècle)', *Médiévales*, 19 (1990), 29–35.
[53] J. Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power, 1300–1800* (Cambridge, 2015).
[54] Note here the distinction between 'dynastic lineages' and 'patrilineal descent groups' in Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 33–4, 37.
[55] Padgett, 'Open elite?', 367.
[56] Platt, *English Medieval Town*, 98.
[57] Thrupp's specific interest was in the direct male line: *Merchant Class*, 199–200.

family – the Barets – survived not through direct descendants but through several collateral lines. The head of the family in the fifteenth century, confronted by the termination of his own line, 'picked nieces and nephews to perpetuate the family name and tradition'.[58] The picture in York remains opaque because Jennifer Kermode, like Thrupp, counted the sons of merchants, yet acknowledged that, 'In the absence of a son, nephews often became their uncle's heir.'[59] Kermode concentrated on patrilineal succession in the direct line, while admitting that there was strong contemporary evidence of 'bilateral kinship'.[60] These discrepancies cast doubt on the consensus around the two- or three-generation life-cycle of English urban families.[61]

Urban patriciates

The potency of this thesis derived also from the way in which historians constructed the situation in continental European towns, against which the English pattern was negatively compared. Accounts of the fluidity and non-hereditary character of late medieval English urban elites juxtaposed a contrary image of the longevity and stability of urban governing groups in continental Europe, where the rule of patriciates prevailed. The reality is, in fact, much more complex.

There is agreement that the terminology of 'patrician' and 'patriciate' is anachronistic. The word 'patrician' dates from the period of classical antiquity and is encountered again only in the sixteenth century; the collective noun 'patriciate' is an even more recent coinage.[62] In a letter that he wrote in 1516 to his friend Johann von Staupitz, vicar general of the Augustinian order in Germany, Christoph Scheurl, a Nuremberg humanist and legal advisor of the city council, surveyed his city's constitution. His analysis attested not only his practical, first-hand knowledge of the city's government but also the breadth of his intellectual horizons. The city council, or 'senate' (*senatus*), comprised forty-two 'senators' (*senatores*), of whom thirty-four were 'patricians' (*patricii*) and eight 'plebeians' (*plebii*).[63]

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[58] R.S. Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290–1539* (Princeton, 1982), 158.
[59] Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 78–9.
[60] *Ibid.*, 72.
[61] See also Cowan, 'Urban elites', 134 n.57.
[62] J. Dumolyn, 'Later medieval and early modern urban elites: social categories and social dynamics', in M. Asenjo-González (ed.), *Urban Elites and Aristocratic Behaviour in the Spanish Kingdoms at the End of the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2013), 4–5.
[63] E. Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt im Mittelalter 1150–1550. Stadtgestalt, Recht, Verfassung, Stadtregiment, Kirche, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft* (2nd rev. edn., Cologne, 2014), 750–1. See also T. Zotz, 'La représentation de la noblesse urbaine en Allemagne médiévale: les tournois et les premiers livres de famille', in C. Petitfrère (ed.),

The patricians were representative of the city's old families, who had long ruled on the basis of hereditary right, possessed ancient coats of arms and could lay claim to quasi-noble status, while the plebeians were representatives of the city's crafts. Scheurl's ambitious comparison of Nuremberg's patricians and the patriciate of the Roman republic, both of whom were senatorial aristocracy dedicated to the maintenance of the common good (*res publica*), is a warning that neo-classical or classical modes of social or political classification have the capacity to distort as well as to reflect historical realities.[64]

Historians have still found it useful to separate the terminology from the underlying concept. The patriciate was a type of regime in which relatively closed groups of families, whose political importance arose from the qualification of birth, controlled town government. The debate is over chronology. Some scholars, following Henri Pirenne, have seen the patriciate as an early manifestation of economic and urban development;[65] others situate the patriciate in the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, in the birth of the early modern 'state' and of the society of the *ancien régime*.

According to one school of thought, there were patriciates in many cities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thirteenth-century Flemish cities were under the economic, political and financial hegemony of an 'urban patriciate' of *viri hereditarii* (hereditary men), while the Florentine 'urban patriciate' that governed the city in this period consisted of a group of urban noble families (*magnati*).[66] Although their income and status were associated with landownership, patriciates were not an exclusively landowning or rentier class; they possessed urban and rural estates, but they might also practise trade. They could enjoy a discrete legal status, or they could not. What they had in common, and what delineated them from the rest of urban society, was their political activity. They were not only involved in the government of the city; they dominated it.

The emergence and rise of the *popolo* transformed the political landscape in cities across northern and central Italy in the second half of the thirteenth century. Laws against the

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Construction, reproduction et représentation des patriciats urbains de l'antiquité au XX^e siècle (Tours, 2013), 431–2.

[64] C.D. Liddy, '"Sir ye be not kyng": citizenship and speech in late medieval and early modern England', *Historical Journal*, 60 (2017), 571–96.

[65] A.B. Hibbert, 'The origins of the medieval town patriciate', *Past and Present*, 3 (1953), 15–27.

[66] For Flanders and the southern Low Countries, see M. Boone, 'Les traditions de rebellions urbaines dans les anciens Pays-Bas: construction d'une identité urbaine, gestation d'une culture politique', in M. Boone (ed.), *À la recherche d'une modernité civique. La société urbaine des anciens Pays-Bas au bas Moyen Âge* (Brussels, 2010), 63 and n.17. For Florence, see Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, ch. 1.

nobility (*leggi antimagnatizie*) specifically prohibited their political participation.[67] Venice, where an extraordinarily formal act of 'closure' (*serrata*) made membership of the great council the hereditary right of a limited number of families in 1297, was the exception that proved the rule.[68] Elsewhere, the fourteenth century was a turning point. In France, urban patriciates declined through a combination of demographic, economic and political factors. The arrival and recurrence of plague caused high levels of mortality, while traditional ruling families were attenuated by the effects of inflation and the stagnation of trade. A new urban elite evolved among men of legal training and expertise. Learning rather than wealth gave access to urban government and facilitated a new partnership between the French crown and the *bonnes villes*, which further legitimized the municipal position of men of law.[69] The 'time of the oligarchy' succeeded the 'time of the patriciate', in the words of Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan.[70] Christine de Pizan's discussion of the social qualifications of urban governors in *The Book of Peace* (*Le livre de paix*), written between 1412 and 1414, was more reactionary than descriptive.[71] Her conviction that the government of towns and cities in France pertained not to the 'little people' but to 'distinguished' burgesses of 'ancient lineage' was wishful thinking: it was a plea for how things *should be*, not a record of how they *were* in practice.[72] In Flanders a series of popular revolts in the early fourteenth century halted the political supremacy of the urban patriciates. The victory of Flemish forces against the French king at the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302 precipitated constitutional changes within cities such as Ghent and Bruges that incorporated middling groups of craftsmen.[73] In German cities, where the vernacular noun *Geschlechter* captured nicely the reproductive quality and familial framework of political power,[74] so-called 'guild revolts' in the fourteenth century challenged the governing classes. The contrast was most visible in Cologne. In the early fourteenth

[67] E.I. Mineo, 'States, orders and social distinction', in A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State* (Cambridge, 2012), 323–44.
[68] For the 1297 *serrata*, see G. Rösch, 'The *serrata* of the great council and Venetian society, 1286–1323', in J. Martin and D. Romano (eds.), *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797* (Baltimore, 2000), 67–88.
[69] A view set out in B. Chevalier, *Les bonnes villes de France* (Paris, 1982), 66–76, and restated more recently in B. Chevalier, 'Le pouvoir par le savoir: le renouvellement des élites urbaines en France au début de l'âge modern (1350–1550), in Petitfrère (ed.), *Construction, reproduction et représentation*, 73–81.
[70] E. Crouzet-Pavan, 'Les élites urbaines: aperçus problématiques (France, Angleterre, Italie)', in C. Gauvard (ed.), *Les élites urbaines au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1997), 18.
[71] Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 102.
[72] Le Roux de Lincy and L.M. Tisserand (eds.), *Paris et ses historiens aux XIV^e^ et XV^e^ siècles, histoire générale de Paris* (Paris, 1867), 417–18.
[73] M. Boone, 'Le pouvoir et la lecture des paysages urbains: Flandre-Italie, une histoire comparative est-elle possible?', in Boone (ed.), *À la recherche d'une modernité civique*, 101.
[74] For the etymology of *Geschlechter*, see Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt*, 760.

century, the city had a foundation myth that was not so much a myth of the origins of the urban commune as a story of the Roman ancestry of the city's patriciate, which claimed descent from the fifteen legendary senatorial families whom the Emperor Trajan is supposed to have sent to the city.[75] By the end of the century, the rule of the *Geschlechter* in Cologne had come to an abrupt end through the political mobilization of the craft guilds and the sealing of a new constitution (the *Verbundbrief*) in 1396.[76]

There is another line of argument, which makes the very end of the Middle Ages *the* period of the rise of urban patriciates. Nuremberg may have been 'a particular case among German cities' in the extent to which the crafts were never sufficiently powerful to achieve significant representation on the town council, but the 1521 *Tanzstatut* seemed to signal a wider trend towards the formalization of 'closed' urban elites.[77] This 'dance statute' restricted attendance at dances in the town hall to forty-two named families (*Geschlechter*), some of whom had a history of service on the town council as far back as before 1362. New rituals of patrician sociability added lustre to the practice of hereditary admission to the town council. The pattern was visible in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in northern Italian cities such as Brescia and Genoa, where books listing definitively which families could claim a seat in the city council were compiled.[78] 'The patriciate' in the Swiss city of Bern at this time also 'closed off and was increasingly successful at monopolizing the city's highest and most rewarding offices.'[79]

Should we still speak, then, of urban patriciates in the late Middle Ages?[80] It is reasonable, but perhaps overly cautious, to conclude that there was spatial and temporal variation across continental Europe. There were urban patriciates in some cities, and in some periods, but not in all urban centres, and not at all times. We could propose that this was, above all, a period of 'urban oligarchy', in which town government was nothing less than the 'rule of the few'. Urban 'patriciates' and urban 'oligarchies' were not successive stages of political organization; the former were a sub-set of the latter. Another conclusion might be that the two seemingly polarized chronological positions are not mutually exclusive. After all,

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[75] U. Surmann, 'Vom städtischen Umgang mit Bildern. Die Bildprogramme des Kölner Rathauses', in H. Kier *et al.* (eds.), *Köln: Der Ratsturm. Seine Geschichte und sein Figurenprogramm* (Cologne, 1996), 172, 180.
[76] Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt*, 767.
[77] Zotz, 'La représentation de la noblesse urbaine', 432; Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt*, 753.
[78] Cowan, 'Urban elites', 133.
[79] Teuscher, 'Politics of kinship', 86.
[80] The question echoes the title of P. Monnet, 'Doit-on encore parler de patriciat dans les villes allemandes de la fin du Moyen Âge?', *Bulletin de la Mission Historique française en Allemagne*, 32 (1996), 54–66.

Christiane Klapisch-Zuber revealed the political rehabilitation of magnates in Florence, where some were prepared to alter their surnames and their coats of arms in the fourteenth century in order to engineer their 'return to the city'.[81]

More incisively, it can be argued that urban 'patricians' endured while urban 'patriciates', as a mode of town government, did not. To take this approach is to adjust the focus slightly, towards the social roots of elite formation and reproduction. Even in cities where patriciates lost their political dominance and where representatives of craft guilds were integrated in urban constitutions, the social values of the political group that shared power were distinctively patrician.[82] Ancestry was a source of honour, which was made tangible in the bearing and transmission of heraldic arms and the writing of 'family books'. The famous woodcut images of Ghent from 1524 displaying the coats of arms of around 100 families may have been a fiction, since many families had either died out or were not as politically active as they had once been, but they were a reimagining and historicizing of the lineage of a whole class, the *poorterij*, who were recognizable by their family names and heraldic arms.[83] In Florence patrician culture was resilient and patrician ideals of family and lineage permeated urban elites through intermarriage and acculturation.[84]

Among other social groups, lineage was a form of social capital whose worth was more prosaic. Proof of birth and lineage, for example, could be a professional desideratum, which was necessary for admission to a craft guild.[85] Lineage was a central aspect of individual and collective patrician *identity*, and it was as much an emotion as an abstract idea. A trait common to all urban patrician classes, wherever and whenever they were located, was 'the notion of taking root' ('la notion d'enracinement'), in Claude Petitfrère's phrase. It involved the 'taking root' of individuals within a lineage and the 'taking root' of lineages within the town.[86] This was language that evoked the metaphor of the family tree. What was the relationship between conceptions of family and lineage? Lineage was a mentality and a

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[81] C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Retour à la cite. Les magnats de Florence, 1340-1440* (Paris, 2006).
[82] See e.g. Isenmann's point that Cologne's *Geschlechter* after the constitution of 1396 were no longer 'a political-social class', but 'a hereditarily-defined social group': *Die deutsche Stadt*, 762.
[83] F. Buylaert *et al.*, 'City portrait, civic body, and commercial printing in sixteenth-century Ghent', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68 (2015), 803–39.
[84] A. Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), ch. 6; Padgett, 'Open elite?', 401–3.
[85] K. Schulz, 'Geburt, Herkunft und Integrität. Zur Handwerksehre vom 13. bis 16. Jahrhundert', in E. Harding and M. Hecht (eds.), *Die Ahnenprobe in der Vormoderne. Selektion, Initiation, Representation* (Münster, 2011), 160.
[86] C. Petitfrère, 'Introduction', in Petitfrère (ed.), *Construction, reproduction et représentation*, 6.

structure. Put simply, it was the vertical perception and construction of family, binding past, present and future;[87] but this definition glosses over the complexity of family structures.

It is among historians of the cities of central and northern Italy that there has been most interest in the composition and morphology of urban families. This historiographical tradition has had its own agenda, inspired in large part by Jacob Burckhardt's thesis that fifteenth-century Florence was the birthplace of modernity and a new spirit of individualism, which Richard Goldthwaite subsequently detected in the evolution of Florentine domestic architecture. As the extended family fragmented into the nuclear family, territorial conglomerates of family power condensed to single dwellings and houses became 'homes', which bore the individual markers of their owners' identity and permitted privacy through their external boundaries and internal divisions.[88] Jacques Heers responded by emphasizing the continuing prominence of the 'clan' ('le clan familial'), the multi-generational family group, into the fifteenth century.[89] Carol Lansing shifted the debate back to the thirteenth century to explore the effect of the political ascent of the *popolo* on the patrician lineages of the Florentine nobility.[90]

In their pioneering analysis of the 1427 Florentine *catasto* (tax), David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber demonstrated that Florence contained multiple family structures.[91] Unlike Heers, Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber were careful to differentiate the 'lineage' from the 'clan'. These were two possible 'descent groups', and their internal structure was not the same. Where the clan described 'a diffuse sentiment of common kinship', the lineage had 'a fixed anchor in the past'. The cohesion and durability of the lineage arose from 'the consciousness possessed by its members of descent from a specific common ancestor, through a line of ascendants of the same sex'.[92] In Florence, where there was unilineal descent, the lineage was a patrilineage, with descent traced through the male line. From the

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[87] D. Crouch, 'The historian, lineage and heraldry 1050–1250', in Coss and Keen (eds.), *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display*, 18–19.
[88] J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, transl. S.G.C. Middlemore (London, 1990). Its impact on historians of the family in Italy is underlined in J. Kirshner, 'Family and marriage: a socio-legal perspective', in J.M. Najemy (ed.), *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2004), 82–102. R.A. Goldthwaite's ideas are set out in *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families* (Princeton, 1968) and 'The Florentine palace as domestic architecture', *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), 977–1012.
[89] Heers, *Family Clans*.
[90] Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*.
[91] D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, 1985). For comment, see F.W. Kent, *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori, and Rucellai* (Princeton, 1977), 11–14.
[92] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, 342, 343. For a similar understanding of 'clan' and 'lineage', from an anthropological perspective, see Goody, *Development of the Family and Marriage*, 224.

thirteenth century elite families became more aware of their lineages, attached great weight to filiation through the father and chose coats of arms and settled on family surnames, both of which could be passed on through the generations.[93] They did so, it is argued, because of the Church's relaxation of the rules about marriage within the prohibited degrees and because of pragmatic concerns among Florentine patricians about matters of property and inheritance.[94]

Historians have been able to discern these changes in the pages of the *libri di ricordanze* or *libri di famiglia*, which were written first in Florence from the late thirteenth century. Stylistically, these books were not homogeneous. Some recorded daily events, chronologically, in the format of a journal; some were more obviously autobiographical; others had details of business transactions. Judged by content and function, they were 'family' books. Accounts of household income and expenditure were complemented by events in the life-cycle of the family such as births, marriages and deaths, practical advice for the governance of the urban household, histories of the family's patrimony and origins, and narratives of the city in which the family resided.[95] Their aim was to fortify and transmit family identity and power. The family was the procreative family, or what German historians call the *Abstammungsfamilie*, whose members were directly related to each other in the blood line.[96] Although the family was envisaged principally as a lineage, the lineage was a *line* of vertical descent *and*, because there were other families that could assert descent from a founding ancestor (*Stammvater*), a *branch* of a much larger lineage.[97] The Florentine *consorteria* was a type of lineage, which had this secondary meaning.

Historians have disagreed about the strength and internal solidarity of the Florentine *consorteria*. To Klapisch-Zuber, it comprised related but essentially separate lineages. The authors of the Florentine *ricordanze* did not always have accurate knowledge of the branches of a family that had a common stem and that were linked to an ancient ancestor.[98] To F.W. Kent, the 'primary meaning' of the *consorteria* was 'a group of kinsmen tracing descent in the male line from a common ancestor',[99] and the lineage, if thought of as the entirety of the

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[93] C. Klapisch-Zuber, 'L'invention du passé familial à Florence (XIV^{e}–XV^{e} siècle)', in *Temps, mémoire, tradition au Moyen Âge* (Aix-en-Provence, 1983), 99–103.
[94] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, 345–7.
[95] G. Ciappelli, *Memory, Family, and Self: Tuscan Family Books and Other European Egodocuments (14th-18th century)* (Leiden, 2014).
[96] Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt*, 777.
[97] This double meaning is expressed by the terminology of 'lines of descent' and '*lignages*' in Jean-Louis Flandrin's influential *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality*, transl. R. Southern (Cambridge, 1979), 14–15.
[98] Klapisch-Zuber, 'L'invention du passé familial', 102–3.
[99] Kent, *Household and Lineage*, 6.

patrilineal kin group rather than a single line, could consist of many individuals and households. The Ginori, Capponi and Rucellai numbered six, twelve and twenty-six households in the 1427 *catasto*, and the tax surveyors, for ease of assessment, counted as households not residential units but associations of blood relations.[100] Lineages (*consorterie*) elicited the loyalty of their constituent branches. They were an object of remembrance in the endowment and patronage of family chapels, which celebrated the cult of ancestors; they had a social presence that was assured by the circulation of family houses within the kinship; and they could be a collective political force, whose representatives occupied council seats or held civic office simultaneously.[101] The explanation for these disparities may be simple: the *consorterie* were descent groups that could take many shapes, as lineages grew, split and formed anew. Larger lineages broke into branches and these branches became their own lineages.[102]

This process, nevertheless, could have serious implications for the structural integrity and familial solidarity of lineages in Italian cities. In her research on Turin, Marta Gravela juxtaposed 'the lineage as a line of descendants, and kinship as a complex association of different lineages (or branches) linked by a common surname and common ancestors, no matter how distant in time'.[103] This distinction between 'lineage' and 'kinship' was deliberate; in Turin, kinship groups were able to endure, sometimes at the expense of lineages, through creative strategies of artificial reproduction, such as the conveyance of estates to a designated rather than 'natural' heir and the transfer of the family surname through a daughter.[104] This kinship group was the 'open lineage family' or *Verwandtschaftsfamilie*, which encompassed, beside the nuclear family of parents and children, not only direct but collateral relations and individuals related by marriage.[105] Marriage was a mechanism to sustain a lineage. In his initial genealogical reconstruction, the Florentine Giovanni Rucellai adhered to a 'clear line of male ancestors' and outlined a 'relentlessly agnatic' idea of lineage. He later came to recognize that a 'recounting of

[100] For the Ginori, Capponi and Rucellai, see *ibid.*, 17. For the 'fiscal' household, see Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, 10, 12–13; Molho, *Marriage Alliance*, 203–4.
[101] Kent, *Household and Lineage*, part 2.
[102] Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 31.
[103] M. Gravela, 'The primacy of patrimony: kinship strategies of the political elite of Turin in the late Middle Ages (1340–1490)', *Continuity and Change*, 32 (2017), 296.
[104] *Ibid.*, 307–9.
[105] Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt*, 777. For a similar distinction, see G. Rohmann, 'Chroniques urbaines et livres de famille: les villes allemandes du XVe au XVIe siècle. Comparaison entre Augsbourg et Hambourg', *Histoire Urbaine*, 28:2 (2010), 32.

generational successions of men was inadequate as a lineage's definition and history, for marriage alliances underlined the bonds – of blood, sentiment, and property – which linked one lineage to others'. Giovanni therefore included in his commonplace book the names of wives, who had married into the Rucellai family, and the names of their descendants and relations.[106] In the end, he omitted the names of women who had been born Rucellai, but who had married out of the family and whose children carried a different surname.[107] By contrast, historians of Venice have shown how vital were women and in-laws (affinal and cognatic kin) in the formation and perpetuation of lineages.[108] Without a synthesis, we might ask: was every city unique?

In the cities of southern Germany and Switzerland, according to Simon Teuscher, two concepts of kinship co-existed. In one, kinship was predicated on the bilateral descent of both people and property. Inheritance practices were neither patrilineal nor ruled by the principle of primogeniture. Material goods were devolved to, and transmitted by, women and men; brothers and sisters could receive an equal division of the inheritance. In the other, kinship was unilineal, and the line was male. In this environment, where neither form of kinship was dominant, urban social structures were not lineage-centred. Urban dynasties emerged only towards the end of the fifteenth century, when processes of state formation at the local level elevated patrilineal kinship and patriarchy to principles of municipal governance. It was then that descent in the male line, specifically from father to son, vanquished other conceptions of kinship, forged either through the maternal branch of the family or through marriage.[109]

This scholarship suggests a richly diverse pattern across late medieval Europe, but it reveals also that calculation of the longevity of urban lineages is inseparable from the contemporary definition and consciousness of lineage. Estimates of the rate of extinction among elite urban families are partly contingent upon how the lineage is interpreted in the first place; and that interpretation has greater explanatory power if it takes account of contemporary perceptions, which might be culturally, geographically and temporally specific.

Re-thinking the English evidence

[106] Molho, *Marriage Alliance*, 340, 341.
[107] *Ibid.*, 342–4.
[108] See the essays collected in S. Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore, 2000), esp. ch. 10.
[109] S. Teuscher, 'Parenté, politique et comptabilité: chroniques familiales autour de 1500 (Suisse et Allemagne du Sud)', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 59 (2004), 851–7; Teuscher, 'Politics of kinship', 78–87.

In order to measure the success or failure of individual urban families in late medieval England, we need to re-think the nature and extent of lineage consciousness and the role of lineages in English urban society and politics. We can do so with reference to two sets of questions. To what extent, in what ways and for what reasons did urban elites conceptualize 'family' *in terms of* 'lineage'? How, why and with what results did some urban lineages last longer than others? Lineage, as we have seen, was both a concept and a phenomenon: a lineal rather than lateral concept of the family and a vertical structure of family formation.

The starting point is the built environment of the city, from the buildings within which individuals and families lived, and with which they were connected, to the records that property generated. The urban parish church was both a locus of family commemoration and a source of ideas about the spiritual authority and importance of lineage. Family coats of arms could encode genealogy.[110] Family identity could be affirmed through the use and adaptation of familial devices on personal seals and the commissioning of family (donor) portraiture on funerary monuments and in stained glass windows. Two adjacent windows in the Lady Chapel of the church of St. Peter Mancroft, one of Norwich's major parish churches where many of the city's merchants were buried, contain a representation of the genealogy of Christ and a depiction of the Holy Kinship. Such imagery was not peculiar to Norwich. English urban elites had sacred models with which to mediate their own experiences of fertility, succession and lineage. Christ's ancestry could be traced through male and female lines.[111]

The house was a site and medium of elite formation and family reproduction, beyond the obviously biological. The construction and solidity of Florentine houses enabled the family to set down roots and attested the family's antiquity, permanence and continuity; their contents reinforced the feeling of belonging to a family group, with its own history.[112] Written sources for English urban houses, from testamentary evidence (wills and probate inventories) to antiquarian description, are relatively abundant. The object of innovative research at the turn of the millennium by members of the York 'Medieval Urban Household' project on concepts of 'domesticity' and 'privacy', and the gendered dimension of space, they

[110] This is one of the themes of Marcus Meer's forthcoming Ph.D. thesis, which I am supervising at Durham with Len Scales.
[111] D. King, 'Medieval glass-painting', in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson (eds.), *Medieval Norwich* (2004), 127–8. For one context, see P. Sheingorn, 'Appropriating the holy kinship: gender and family history', in K. Ashley and P. Sheingorn (eds.), *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: St. Anne in Late Medieval Society* (London, 1990), 169–98.
[112] Klapisch-Zuber, 'L'invention du passé familial', 104.

are under-exploited for investigation of the urban home as a place of ancestral memory.[113] Yet the objects that furnished people's residences decoratively or functionally, that were recorded in probate inventories and that were bequeathed in wills could display emblems of family honour and communicate affective ties, or be intended as – or become – family heirlooms.[114] According to new archaeological and architectural work on the large collection of surviving merchants' houses from late medieval Norwich, these residences passed between elite families through marriage, inheritance and purchase, and succeeding owners took care to retain the familial symbolism of previous inhabitants.[115] The physical fabric of the home could embody ideas of lineage.

Records of urban property, particularly charters, have been mined both to reconstitute the physical topography and tenement histories of English cities such as Norwich and Bristol and, more imaginatively in recent years, to decode and evaluate the social relationships that the inheritance and conveyance of property created.[116] These sources are a treasure trove of genealogical information that can be exploited more fully to uncover contemporary assumptions of lineage and to map the spatial concentration, dispersion and disintegration of family power. From the thirteenth century Norwich deeds and extracts from wills devising lands or tenements were enrolled in the city court, while the London court of husting was similarly the legal venue for the registration of private deeds and probate of wills, which could and did lead to litigation and conflicting claims to property. Pleas of land and common pleas about the alienation of property, inheritance, marriage and dower were enrolled separately in the London court.[117] Maryanne Kowaleski hailed the potential utility of urban property disputes to the history of English urban families over thirty years ago, but these legal

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[113] For the 'Medieval Urban Household' project, see S. Rees Jones *et al.*, 'The later medieval English urban household', *History Compass*, 5 (2007), 112–58. See also M. Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg (eds.), *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008).

[114] For probate inventories, see TNA, PROB 2 and R.H. Leech, *The Town House in Medieval and Early Modern Bristol* (Swindon, 2014), ch. 5. For wills, see L. Liddy, 'Affective bequests: creating emotion in York wills, 1400–1600', in M. Champion and A. Lynch (eds.), *Understanding Emotions in Early Europe* (Turnhout, 2015), 273–89.

[115] C. King, 'Private lives and public power: Norwich merchants' houses between the 14th and 16th centuries', in T.A. Heslop and H.E. Lunnon (eds.), *Norwich: Medieval and Early Modern Art, Architecture and Archaeology* (Leeds, 2015), 341–58.

[116] For the work of reconstruction, see e.g. *The Topography of Medieval and Early Modern Bristol: Part I*, ed. R.H. Leech (Bristol Record Society, 48, 1997), and the largely unpublished research of the Norwich Survey, whose maps were deposited in the Norfolk Record Office (NRO, MC 146/52) in the 1980s. For interpretation, see Rees Jones, *York*.

[117] NRO, NCR 1; London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), CLA/023/DW, CLA/023/PL/01, CLA/023/CP/01. Summary translations of the wills are published in *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London 1258–1688*, ed. R.R. Sharpe (2 vols., London, 1889–90).

sources remain untapped.[118] There has also been limited engagement with the legal context of common law and borough custom in English cities and, in particular, with those aspects of law touching dower, dowry and inheritance, despite the publication in the early twentieth century of several collections of borough custom.[119] The laws and practices of inheritance and succession expressed and shaped contemporary attitudes towards the relative weight of maternal and paternal lines of descent and the extent to which women were carriers and embodiments of lineage. In examining the intersection between legal norms and social practices, we might learn that customary law changed, under pressure from the patrilineal demands of urban elites.

Private cartularies, held not by corporate bodies but by individuals, were much more than collections of deeds relating to rights and title to land and the privileges that accompanied property ownership. Although they were often devoid of conspicuous decoration, they were a legal record of claims to land that might in future be contested and could be put together to commemorate a special occasion such as the acquisition of an estate or the settlement of a marriage, which were key moments in a family's history.[120] They were stores of family memory. English urban cartularies such as the 'lygger' (ledger) of the Bristol and London merchant George Monoux and the *Liber Lynne*, written by a London citizen and grocer by the name of John Lawney around 1430, deserve more attention. The *Liber Lynne* opens with a memorandum 'to alle my childerin and [t]here Eyris' and records Lawney's property in London, Southwark and the Norfolk port of Lynn. In its prosaic, but purposeful transcription of the family estate for the benefit of its author's children and descendants, the *Liber Lynne* was a 'family book'.[121]

Whether we agree that there are English equivalents to a continental genre of 'family books' hinges on their definition. The Florentine *libri di ricordanze* are so numerous as to be regarded either as a distinctively Florentine phenomenon or as *the* literary standard against which all other forms of urban genealogical literature from the period should be judged. There was a vernacular tradition of 'family books' in German cities such as Nuremberg,

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[118] M. Kowaleski, 'The history of urban families in medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 14 (1988), 51–2.

[119] *Borough Customs*, ed. M. Bateson (2 vols., Selden Society, 18, 21, 1904, 1906). A notable exception is Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, who argued that the legal rights of women facilitated the circulation of capital in late medieval London.

[120] *A Calendar of the Cartularies of John Pyel and Adam Fraunceys*, ed. S.J. O'Connor (Camden, 5th series, 2, 1993), 75–9, 88–9.

[121] British Library, Add. MS 18783; LMA, COL/CS/01/015. For brief comment on the *Liber Lynne*, see M. Richardson, *Middle-Class Writing in Late Medieval London* (London, 2011), 74.

Augsburg, Cologne and Frankfurt, the oldest surviving example of which is the late fourteenth-century book of the Nuremberg merchant Ulman Stromer, whose production has been tentatively attributed to a Florentine exemplum.[122] It has been more common to compare the Florentine and German books, the latter of which, despite the title of the late fifteenth-century *Tagebuch* of Lucas Rem of Augsburg, were not diaries or journals of a personal nature. Awareness of the origins of one's family, and the history of one's ancestors – their property and their achievements – could inspire, instruct and ennoble.[123] Comparison has so far hindered research on the so-called *livres de raison* in France.[124] In England the comparison has been more invidious. The stimulus to the compilation of Florentine family books was fear of the termination of the line and desire to guarantee its continuation.[125] 'Unlike their Florentine contemporaries', argued Jennifer Kermode, 'Yorkshire merchants did not articulate anxieties about the precarious existence of families'.[126] Kermode viewed the lack of 'family books' as confirmation of the transient nature of English urban families. We should not disguise or ignore the gaps in the written record. There are now few obvious vestiges of the private archives that still exist, for example, in Ghent, where the archives of the Lanchals-de Ladeuze and Kerchove families are accessible in the City Archive and the records of the Borluut family are divided between the City Archive and the State Archive.[127] These lacunae require explanation. Too little is currently known about the archival practices of English urban families. If there was divergence in record-keeping, was it because elite families in English towns were happy to place their faith in the civic books and rolls that served as land registries of private transactions? In which case, family loyalties were no obstacle to a shared urban identity; they nourished and sustained it. However, to expand the

[122] For a short conspectus of examples, see Isenmann, *Die deutsche Stadt*, 764–5. There is a growing secondary literature on these books, principally but not exclusively in German, notably the 2007 volume edited by Birgit Studt: *Haus- und Familienbücher*. For the possible influence of Florentine role models on Ulman Stromer's book and on other German family books, see U.M. Zahnd, 'Einige Bemerkungen zu spätmittelalterlichen Familienbüchern aus Nürnberg und Bern', in R. Endres (ed.), *Nurnberg und Bern. Zwei Reichsstädte und ihre Landgebiete* (Erlangen, 1990), 18, 35–6.
[123] Rohmann, 'Chroniques urbaines', 22–3.
[124] J. Tricard, 'Les livres de raison français au miroir des livres de famille italiens: pour relancer une enquête', *Revue historique*, 624 (2002), 993, 999. It is not the only reason, as Tricard explains.
[125] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, 357–8.
[126] J. Kermode, 'Sentiment and survival: family and friends in late medieval English towns', *Journal of Family* History, 24 (1999), 15 n.20.
[127] Stadsarchief Gent (SAG), Familiearchief, Inventaris 78/1, Familiearchief, Inventaris 127; Rijksarchief Gent, Familiefonds Borluut, nr. 600. For the reconstructed archive of one London family, see J. Williams, 'A late-medieval family and its archive: the Forsters of London, c.1440–c.1550', University of London Ph.D. thesis, 2011. See also N.W. Alcock, 'The Catesbys in Coventry: a medieval estate and its archives', *Midland History*, 15 (1990), 1–36.

genre of ‘family books’ so as to include cartularies, account books, devotional books such as books of hours and manuscripts that have been categorized by literary scholars as commonplace books, miscellanies and/or household books would open up further possibilities.[128] These types of writing did act as repositories of family history.

English cities were certainly no different from continental urban centres in the economic and demographic challenges that they confronted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As the eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith hypothesized, it was not only in England where ‘Urban fortunes were generally more volatile than those founded on land’.[129] Once the accumulation of wealth was dependent upon the practice of trade not the inheritance of land, the transmission of power from one generation to the next was inherently more perilous. We should study how English urban elites tried to withstand economic crisis and to overcome debt, loss or bankruptcy, and whether they were successful. Certificates of debt, which were issued under Statute Merchant and Statute Staple in royally sanctioned debt registries located in cities across England from the late thirteenth century, have allowed economic historians to make new contributions to the debate about ‘urban decline’; they are also an essential source for the economic activity of individuals.[130] Did English townspeople, as did many city-based families in Italy, invest in land? Did they see land as security, which could offset commercial failure and prevent the extinction and rapid turnover of families? The Coventry lawyer and ‘gentilman’ John Smyth, who made his will in 1500, valued land economically and dynastically. When he gave to his son Henry all his residual money, over and above the payment of his debts and the fulfilment of his other legacies, he insisted that Henry use it for ‘the purchacyng of lond to his vse and his heires and not to bye shepe nor catell nor to paye his dettes therwith but onely for purchessing of londes to hym and his heires for ever’.[131] Perversely, the clarity of Smith’s intentions is a reminder of how much

[128] See e.g. J. Boffey, ‘Bodleian Library, MS Arch. Selden B. 24 and definitions of the “household book”’, in A.S.G. Edwards *et al.* (eds.), *The English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths* (London, 2000), 125–34.
[129] Although the quotation is from Fleming, ‘Telling tales’, 178, see R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner (eds.), *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. 1* (Oxford, 1976), 421–2, cited in Molho, *Marriage Alliance*, 1–2. For a similar argument, see S.K. Cohn Jr., ‘Two pictures of family ideology taken from the dead in post-plague Flanders and Tuscany’, in M. Carlier and T. Soens (eds.), *The Household in Late Medieval Cities: Italy and Northwestern Europe Compared* (Leuven, 2001), 177–8.
[130] TNA, C 241; R. Goddard, *Credit and Trade in Later Medieval England, 1353–1532* (Basingstoke, 2016).
[131] TNA, PROB 11/13/83.

historians do not know about the nature, extent and rationale of urban investment in land outside the city walls in England.[132]

Wills registered and enacted individual and collective family strategies of family formation and survival. They are plentiful from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for many of the larger English towns such as London and Norwich, whose civic courts enrolled wills devising land, tenements or rents and whose church courts technically had probate of wills bequeathing personal goods.[133] Cities established an apparatus of courts and rules governing the inheritance and transfer of property to uphold the legal rights and to satisfy the familial concerns of citizens. While property was liable to provoke disputes within and between families, it could also guarantee the stability and viability of the lineage and, by extension, the maintenance of the urban peace. In cities such as Bristol and London civic courts assigned guardians to look after the underage heirs and property of citizens who had died while their children were minors. Bristol has a book of orphans for the appointment of guardians, and another register of recognizances for the custody of orphans.[134] The supervisory role of the London court of aldermen in the guardianship of heirs, the allocation of their inheritances and the arrangement of their marriages is documented in the city's plea and memoranda rolls and letter-books.[135] These records of wardship compare to the wills and inventories of personal property and real estate (*staten van goed*) copied into the annual registers of the *Gedeele*, one of the two benches of aldermen of the city of Ghent.[136] London law, Barbara Hanawalt found, operated primarily in the interests of the child, such that in practice the mother's family was mostly preferred to the father's family in the selection of guardians. This process was ultimately detrimental to the orphaned child, particularly when widows remarried. It was the solution to 'Caxton's Puzzle', with which this article began.[137] Yet to accept Caxton's premise as fact is surely contestable for the reasons that this article has proposed. The thesis is inconsistent because, as Hanawalt admitted, the system of guardianship in London 'was very effective for ensuring the survival of citizens' children', and 'London widows were well enough provided for that they could raise their children alone

[132] Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 286, 288, 290, 291. For a more recent appraisal, see T. Graham, 'Knights and merchants: English cities and the aristocracy, 1377-1509', University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2017.
[133] For this distinction, which was not always observed, see *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting*, vol. I, xxiv–xxv, xxxi–xxxii, xlii.
[134] Bristol Record Office, 04421/1a-c, 04422.
[135] E. Clark, 'City orphans and custody laws in medieval England', *American Journal of Legal History*, 34 (1990), 168–87.
[136] SAG, Oud Archief, Serie 330.
[137] Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, 90–2, 95–6, 106–7.

or remarry without disadvantaging the survival of their children and their inheritances.'[138] We should look again at the evidence, more sensitive to the ways in which lineage was conceptualized.

Conclusion

In approaching the family affectively and structurally, and in exploring the sense of family as lineage, it is empirically and conceptually possible to address the problematic that William Caxton identified. Caxton's dichotomy, which is entrenched in the secondary literature on English towns and which has never been queried, rests upon sometimes unspoken and occasionally contradictory assumptions about the nature of English urban life and about the distinctions between English and continental towns. Historians of English towns have been reluctant to assess the influence of the family on urban society and city politics, which has only exaggerated the social and political differences. We should consider the political organization of towns and ask whether lineage was fundamentally a political norm, which was necessary, desirable or beneficial to participation in town government, and whether these differences in attitudes towards political status and ancestry explain a more urgent preoccupation with lineage reproduction in some cities over others. Alternatively, lineage may have been an existential, and universal, concern among urban elites, to whom it not only reinforced social status, but imparted a sense of place, belonging and identity.

Elite urban families in England reproduced themselves not only biologically, but in the writing and commissioning of texts, in the patronage of art and architecture, in the transmission of household objects, in the construction and conveyance of property, in the management of economic resources and in the use of law. Through a study of elite reproduction, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods, we can interrogate the meaning of lineage and calibrate the length of lineages. We can then determine whether the existing paradigm of urban dynasties is an appropriate model for understanding the supposed differences between England and continental Europe and one of the historical roots of English exceptionalism.

[138] *Ibid.*, 107.