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Citation for published version:

Zenobi, L 2021, 'Mobility and urban space in early Modern Europe: An introduction', *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, pp. 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-BJA10035>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1163/15700658-BJA10035](https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-BJA10035)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of Early Modern History

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BRILL

JOURNAL OF EARLY
MODERN HISTORY 25 (2021) 1–10

Journal of
Early Modern
History

brill.com/jemh

Mobility and Urban Space in Early Modern Europe: An Introduction

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Abstract

Early modernists have explored a range of mobile practices taking place in cities: from religious and civic rituals to the multisensory experience of traversing streets and squares. Research has also shown the pivotal role played by cities as hubs where people came and went, ideas circulated, and goods passed through. Yet mobility did not just “take place” in cities. In presenting a new collection of articles on the subject, this paper suggests that urban spaces were more than just a stage for the streams of trade and migration. Rather, mobility had a transformative effect on cities: it assigned new meaning to urban locations, altered the ways in which space was ordered, and often refashioned the built environment itself. In addition, the paper argues that the relationship between movement and urban spaces was reciprocal: by channelling the flow of people through spaces of control and reception, cities shaped mobility as much as mobility shaped cities.

Keywords

introduction – mobility – space – cities – early modern Europe

Introduction

In recent years, early modernists have placed mobility at the forefront of their agenda. As with many other trends, the source of this growing fascination with the history of all things mobile can be traced to the defining features of our present. Mobility has arguably shaped the foundations of modern society: from transnationalism to globalization, from cosmopolitanism to cultural hybridity,

from the current migrant crisis to the unprecedented spread of pandemics. As territorial attachments dwindle, mobility has become the prime identifier of an increasing number of people – not only migrants and exiles, but also commuters and digital nomads. And while modern lives are fundamentally shaped by mobility, they are simultaneously confined by a growing web of spatial restrictions, such as those enforced by international norms, traffic regulations, and other mobility regimes. With issues of mobility occupying center stage in modern societies the world over, it should come as no surprise that they are now equally informing historical inquiry.

History is only the latest field influenced by this trend. While great volumes of research have been devoted to various kinds and expressions of mobility in other arts and humanities disciplines,¹ a genuine “mobility turn” has emerged in the social sciences.² Molded by interdisciplinary collaboration between sociologists and human geographers, the turn centers upon the notion that aside from specific structures and phenomena (such as transport, migration, and travel), mobility lies at the heart of every human activity: from work to family life, from the private to public sphere, from the experience of the individual to that of groups and communities. It follows that mobility is not only a subject worth studying in its own right, but a methodological lens for analyzing society as a whole. For social scientists, this is nowhere as true as when considering the modern era: in a world where all people, objects, and ideas seem to be increasingly on the move, focusing on mobility becomes essential to our

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- 1 A re-assessment of arts and humanities work in this area is included in the special issue of the interdisciplinary journal *Mobilities* curated by Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, eds., *Mobilities and the Humanities*, 12, no. 4 (2017); as well as in Susanne Witzgall, Gerlinde Vogl, and Sven Kesselring, eds., *New Mobilities Regimes in Art and Social Sciences* (Farnham, 2013); while an important model can be found in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2009). From a social science perspective, historiography’s main contribution is the field of modern transport history: Colin Dival, “Transport History, the Usable Past and the Future of Mobility,” in *Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society*, eds. Margaret Griego and John Urry (Farnham, 2011): 305–319; Colin G. Pooley, “Connecting historical studies of transport, mobility and migration,” *The Journal of Transport History* 38, no. 2 (2017): 251–259.
 - 2 Key readings on the mobility turn in the social sciences are Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” *Environment & Planning A: Economy and Space* 38 (2006): 207–226; Peter Adey, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman, and Mimi Sheller, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (London, 2013); Thomas Faist, “The Mobility Turn: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 11 (2006): 1637–1646; Sven Kesselring, “Mobility, Power and the Emerging New Mobilities Regimes,” *Sociologica* 1 (2014): 1–30; James Faulconbridge and Allison Hui, “Traces of a Mobile Field: Ten Years of Mobilities Research,” *Mobilities* 11, no. 1 (2016): 1–14; and Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “Mobilizing the New Mobilities Paradigm,” *Applied Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (2016): 10–25.

understanding of society itself.³ As a matter of fact, several scholars have gone as far as to frame modernity using a kinetic vocabulary, as when characterizing our modern world in terms of fluidity, seamless connections, and globalized networks.⁴

As much research has already made clear, however, mobility is just as key to understanding our past as it is to understanding our present. While modernists have generally been prompt to adopt the suggestions of the mobility turn, historians of early modern Europe are yet to fully incorporate the all-encompassing approach which social scientists tend to favor. Within their respective fields, early modernists have always been interested in individual phenomena driven by motion. Some have written about the social history of travel, typically using sources such as reports, diaries, and other forms of travel literature.⁵ Attention has been paid to the multisensory experience of movement, including emotions and personal encounters as much as logistics and travel infrastructures, and to the artistic and poetic representation of it. Others have focused on highly scripted and symbolic forms of mobilities, as in the case of religious processions and civic rituals.⁶ Adopting insights from anthropology to write a cultural history of these practices, the work of these scholars has emphasized the role of mobile performances in making political claims, validating institutions, and even reinforcing social distinctions. Others still have investigated the phenomenon of migration at both macro and micro levels.⁷ Once dominated by studies of diasporas and population transfer, this is

3 Excellent examples of this approach are the books by Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Western World* (London, 2006); John Urry, *Mobilities* (London, 2007), and Peter Merriman, *Mobility, Space and Culture* (London, 2012); as well as the papers collected by Colin Divall, ed., *Cultural Histories of Sociabilities, Spaces and Mobilities* (London, 2015).

4 Among many others, influential works include Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford, 1996); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity* (Cambridge, 2000).

5 On early modern travel, see the recent special issue of *Renaissance Studies* edited by Eva Johanna Holmberg, *Renaissance and Early Modern Travel: Practice and Experience, 1500-1700*, 33, no. 4 (2019); and the early modern related essays published in the new *Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, eds. Nandini Das and Tim Youngs (Cambridge, 2019).

6 Among a great many collections of essays on these topics, consider Kathleen Ashley and Wim Hüskén, eds., *Moving Subjects. Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Amsterdam, 2001); Nicholas Howe, ed., *Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe* (Notre Dame, 2007); Herman Du Toit, ed., *Pageants and Processions: Image and Idiom as Spectacle* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009); and Maria Ines Alverti, Ronnie Mulryne, and Anna Maria Testaverde, eds., *Ceremonial Entries in Early Modern Europe: The Iconography of Power* (Farnham, 2015).

7 On migration history, consider Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans. Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington, 1992); Jacques Dupâquier, "Macro-migrations en Europe

now a rich field which addresses topics as diverse as the bureaucracy of movement (safe-conducts, health passes, and other forms of travel documents) and the everyday life of foreigners and newcomers (their living conditions, settlement patterns, and relationships with pre-existing residents). Against this multifaceted backdrop, today's renewed interest in mobility appears as yet another proof of the centrality of mobility to the study of various facets of early modern society.

This collection of articles adopts a different approach. Instead of centering on an individual phenomenon driven by motion, the issue as a whole takes a defined space as a focal point from which to study how multiple and often interconnected mobilities shaped our past. That space is the early modern city. This new formulation questions the boundaries between different and sometimes isolated fields of historical scholarship by considering them together within the same analytical framework. At the same time, this approach allows us to adopt the principal suggestion of the mobility turn: while it is an important object of inquiry in its own right, mobility is key to our appreciation of (urban) society in the early modern period. In keeping with analogous trends in the social sciences, the issue aims to go beyond the examination of simple physical displacement – intended as the action of moving from one place to another – to investigate the material ramifications of movement and especially its contingent meaning. Stated differently, this collection seeks to study mobility as a socially and culturally embedded practice, as something which is constantly perceived and indeed performed and talked about by contemporaries, and is therefore essential to their experience and understanding of the world.⁸

(XVI^e–XVIII^e siecles),” in *Le migrazioni in Europa, secc. XIII–XVIII*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Florence, 1994), 65–90; Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, *Migration. Migration History, History. Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Berne, 1999); Eid., “The Mobility Transition Revisited, 1500–1900: What the Case of Europe Can Offer to Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (2009): 347–377; Bert De Munk and Anne Winter, eds., *Gated Communities? Regulating Migration in Early Modern Cities* (London, 2012); and Hilde Greefs and Anne Winter, eds., *Migration Policies and Materialities of Identification in European Cities. Papers and Gates, 1500–2000* (Abingdon, 2018).

- 8 For this generative understanding of mobility, see Tim Cresswell, “The production of mobilities,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 43 (2001): 3–25; Peter Adey, “If Mobility is Everything then It is Nothing: Towards a Relational Politics of (Im)mobilities,” *Mobilities* 1 (2006): 75–94; Birgitta Frello, “Towards a Discursive Analytics of Movement: On the Making and Unmaking of Movement as an Object of Knowledge,” *Mobilities* 3, no. 1 (2008): 25–50; and Tim Cresswell, Colin Divall, Rhys Jones, Gijs Mom, Peter Merriman, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, “Mobility: Geographies, Histories, Sociologies,” *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 147–165.

Movement is a constant feature of urban life, rendering cities the ideal context in which to observe how various mobilities shaped the existence of early modern people. People tend to associate cities with neighborhoods, streets, squares, walls, and architecture, but one needs only to stand by a roadside or under a building to be reminded that cities are also sites of flows – spaces in which individuals come and go, objects pass through, and information circulates. Much as it does today, mobility animated the very life of early modern cities and, in doing so, it structured the condition of urban dwellers and visitors alike. No matter their occupation or social backgrounds, all individuals moving to or around cities became part of both local and trans-local networks: the supplying of goods and victuals to the municipal market (sellers, buyers, carriers), the provision of services and labor (migrant and transport workers), and the collection and spreading of information both within and beyond the city walls (diplomats and couriers, investors and intellectuals). In brief, as much geographical literature has already emphasized, cities have always been both clusters of spaces and circulatory systems.⁹ As such, they offer the perfect vantage point from which to examine how mobility shaped early modern society.

Still, the urban environment has always been more than just a node – a mere arrival or departure for the flows of migration, trade, diplomacy, and war. In fact, the various forms of mobility that animated early modern cities had a transformative and indeed productive effect on urban spaces. Movement gave new meaning to streets, buildings and squares; it changed the ways in which space was used and regulated, and often prompted alterations in the built environment itself. Mobility was, in its essence, one of the many social and cultural practices that fashioned urban spaces. It should therefore be clear that this collection subscribes to the idea that space is never just an empty container – a mere arena for people's agency. Instead, it is assumed that space is continuously generated and filled with meaning by a series of human practices.¹⁰ Once it is agreed that every form of mobility has material and cognitive implications

9 Specifically, on the idea of cities as both spaces and systems of movement, see Ole B. Jensen, "Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements: Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice," *Mobilities* 4, no. 1 (2009): 139–158; and many of the essays gathered by Julie Cidell and David Prytherch, eds., *Transport, Mobility, and the Production of Urban Space* (London, 2015).

10 Among others, two notable collections of essays by pre-modern urban historians are informed by this idea: Marc Boone and Martha Howell, eds., *The Power of Space in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: the Cities of Italy, Northern France and the Low Countries* (Turnhout, 2013); and Jan Dumolyn, Katrien Lichtert, and Maximiliaan P. J. Martens, eds., *Portraits of the City: Representing Urban Space in Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, 2014). However, see also Peter Arnade, Martha C. Howell, and Walter Simons, "Fertile Spaces: The Productivity of Urban Space in Northern Europe," *The Journal of*

that transcend the physical action of moving, investigating how this contributed to the construction of early modern spaces becomes pivotal.¹¹

In addition, it is crucial to bear in mind that urban spaces shaped mobility as much as mobility shaped urban spaces. Just as movement fashioned the material and social fabric of cities, so cities channeled and restricted the many streams of movement traversing them at any time. In the early modern period, phenomena such as migration, trade, pilgrimage, war, and diplomacy prompted different kinds of mobilities and called for a range of spatial arrangements. Cities incorporated each of these mobilities into their social and political structures, but they also endeavored to monitor the movement of people and goods in order to meet both their pressing needs and their long-term goals. Urban governments maintained transport infrastructures, including roads and bridges, but also rivers and waterways. Using tax exemptions and custom duties, they orchestrated the flow of products and resources to and from their markets. More importantly, they virtually controlled the movement of every individual: from architectural interventions and municipal planning to settlement regulations and migration policies, urban designs have always altered the ways in which people move in and around their spaces. As civic magistrates designed formal institutions to respond to the shifting needs of different kinds of mobility, urban communities were faced with the challenge of framing the interactions between themselves and the outside world. Guilds and clergymen, merchants and workers, cartmen and innkeepers all adopted solutions which were both parallel to and convergent with those developed by state authorities and municipal governments. In short, the history of mobility in early modern cities is also one of immobility; it is but another chapter of the story of the tension between the artificial fixity imposed by spatial bounds and people's natural desire to move.

The present issue investigates this tension across a variety of interconnected levels. The first is that of internal movement. Early modern cities were a world on the move in their own right: royal entries, religious processions, civic pageants, wall patrols, and even trade networks informed the city's

Interdisciplinary History 32, no. 4 (2002): 515–548; and generally, Paul Stock, ed., *The Uses of Space in Early Modern History* (Basingstoke, 2015).

11 Further, on the ways in which the mobility turn is currently changing the way in which social scientists think about space, see the recent reflections by Mimi Sheller, "From spatial turn to mobilities turn," *Current Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2017): 623–639; and the papers collected by Tim Cresswell and Ginette Verstraete, eds., *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World* (Amsterdam, 2002); and Mei-Po Kwan and Tim Schwanen, *Geographies of Mobility: Recent Advances in Theory and Method* (London, 2017).

inner environment in fundamental ways. At a local level, cities continuously interacted with their outskirts and peripheral neighborhoods. Urban fringes were extremely dynamic areas, serving as the most immediate space where the movement of visitors – not to mention invaders – was negotiated. At a regional level, cities channeled movement from surrounding areas, acting both as poles of attraction for migrants and as distribution centers for goods and human resources. Finally, at a broader level, early modern cities functioned as the intersections of a dense network of trans-regional and long-distance mobilities. This encouraged cities to develop spaces not only for the reception and control of everyday mobility, but also for accommodating people and products arriving from different cultures and polities: from ghettos and minority neighborhoods to the buildings designed to host foreign dignitaries and diplomatic agents.

The issue opens with an essay that considers simultaneously many of these interconnected levels. In it, Marcus Meer explores how mobility was materialized and visually communicated by traveling townsmen. Centering on German as well as Swiss and Polish cities, his article investigates two related phenomena. The first is the habit of leaving behind one's coat of arms when visiting pilgrimage destinations or far-away courts. The second is the custom of displaying chivalric badges and other heraldic signs in one's hometown, notably as a way to commemorate one's achievements as a traveler. On the one hand, these mobile practices left a mark on the spaces visited by townsmen from German-speaking lands, a mark which fellow Europeans readily identified and often annotated in their accounts. On the other, they filled European cities with visual and material reminders of far-reaching journeys, thus loading their spaces with meanings generated by movement, starting from the idea that having travelled to exotic locations generated social prestige. Employing travel accounts alongside material evidence, including clothing and relics as much as architecture, Meer examines the effects of these practices on the political and social life of European cities. Indeed, as an established way to raise one's standing within the urban community, displaying evidence of travel experiences was bound to create tensions among burgesses, nobles, and city councils. More broadly, his piece uncovers the centrality of the heraldic representation of travel to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century urban life, while also highlighting the place of mobility in the visual and material culture of the time.

Meer's focus on townsmen from highly urbanized areas of continental Europe is retained in the second article in the issue, authored by Pablo Gonzalez Martin. Taking revolts that took place in the city of Tournai as a case study, his piece highlights the significance of the itineraries of rebels for the production and re-appropriation of urban spaces. Like Meer, Gonzalez Martin

looks at two related phenomena. In the first part of his article, he shows that in an attempt to legitimize their actions, the rebellious citizens of Tournai chose routes through the city which were commonly used for public occasions, thus managing to disrupt the itineraries used by the council and other urban institutions to conduct their affairs and – with that – display their power. In the second part, attention is moved from the appropriation of old spaces to the production of new ones. In this part, the author follows the rebels as they leave the council-dominated market square and journey to a space which they could make their own. In 1425, this was the Becquerel square in the industrial neighborhood of St Brice, where Tournai's city council was finally forced to travel to meet the rebels' demands, thus signaling a major shift in negotiating power. Using both administrative and narrative sources, Gonzalez Martin furthers our understanding of an understudied dimension of pre-modern revolts: the mobile dimension. To start, his article moves emphasis away from the act of taking control of urban spaces, placing it instead on the practice of disrupting and appropriating entire itineraries. In addition, his piece shows that while municipal governments and state authorities were well-accustomed to using urban spaces for mobile displays of power (famously through joyous entries and other civic rituals), rebellious citizens could still give new meaning to those same spaces – or even produce new spaces – by enacting their own mobile performances.

The theme of politics in motion is picked up and developed further by Niall Atkinson in the third article. Building on the methodological framework of this issue, his piece develops a new approach to early modern politics. This is understood by Atkinson as a series of mobile actions and counteractions that generate meaning as they unfold in space. Proposing that moving through specific locations can send powerful messages to a receptive audience, the author focuses on a case in which the itinerary of a foreign authority – and with that its intended message – was manipulated by local powers, thus carrying a very different meaning to the urban public. The case study Atkinson uses is that of the momentous events surrounding the entrance of Charles VIII in Florence, as told through some of the eye-witness accounts left by Florentine citizens. In the article, the author follows the king of France as he willfully treads the streets of Florence, before losing his way in a dramatic demonstration of his spatial isolation from the network of loyalties and social relations upon which a city such as Florence was built. Like Gonzalez Martin, Atkinson sees the performance of mobility within specific spaces as a way to deliver a deliberate statement, making it part of the language of early modern political negotiation. Like Meer, however, Atkinson pays particular attention to the materiality of that performance, including objects as well as architectures, while also

considering the memorial and narrative dimension of the events. Ultimately, his essay not only mobilizes our understanding of early modern politics, but also makes a case for the ability of the urban public to read and often act upon the significance conferred by movement to the spaces of the city.

In the following article, Rosa Salzberg shifts focus from the layers of meaning that mobility inscribed onto urban spaces to the ways in which it molded the material and social structure of cities. In early modern Europe, the growing streams of people and products, coming from a diversity of places and responding to a variety of necessities and motivations, called for urban centers to develop an equally varied and multi-purposed set of infrastructures: spaces of reception, control, and re-distribution. The inns of early modern Venice (*osterie*, in Italian) are a well-documented and yet still understudied example of such spaces, so it is on them that Salzberg focuses. In the first half of her piece, she explores the role played by the *osterie* as spaces of encounter between short- and long-distance travelers as well as between travelers and city dwellers. These spaces are shown by the author to be hubs in which different trajectories, cultures, and ways of life came into contact with each other, while also intersecting with the itineraries of Venetians around their city. In the second half of the essay, Salzberg considers the material and physical features of the *osterie*, as well as their impact on the fabric of the city as a whole. Drawing on both private inventories and public records, she reconstructs the multiple functions served by the *osterie* through an examination of their interiors and overall location: from the provision of victuals, lodgings, and sometimes company, to the exchange of objects, currencies, and information, to the realization of revenues for the state as much as for their owners. On the whole, using the example of a major travel destination such as Venice, Salzberg's piece demonstrates the potential of inns for the study of the interconnected mobilities and mobile experiences which shaped the fabric of European cities.

Last but not least, Eleonora Canepari's article deepens the issue's examination of urban inns as spaces of arrival, reception, and cultural encounter in the early modern period. In keeping with Salzberg's approach, Canepari sees inns as the critical nodes through which urban spaces were transformed, and the lives of travelers and citizens intertwined. Unlike Salzberg, however, Canepari chooses to move away from the core of cities to investigate mobility at their fringes. Her case studies are the semi-rural neighborhoods of Rome and Marseille, two cities which lay at the crossroads of multiple trajectories in the early modern period and were therefore profoundly shaped by the fluidity of their population. In the first section of her essay, Canepari examines how the presence of inns and mobile workers changed the demographic profile of peripheral neighborhoods, transformed their economy and considerably

re-defined the spatial limits of these cities. In the second section, she narrows her focus to the individual biographies of the buildings in question. These are reconstructed across several centuries, tracing the meeting points between the lives of their many patrons and owners, before showing that they continue to serve the needs of a society in motion to this very day. In doing so, her article provides a vivid reminder of how much both past and present mobilities mold the spaces we live in, and of the contribution of different generations of mobile people to their current configuration. More broadly, Canepari's article also acts as a call to adopt a more inclusive notion of cities – one that looks beyond the perspective of municipal authorities to question the boundaries between residents and visitors, between settled and unsettled people.

Finally, the five articles are commented on by Fabrizio Nevola in a thoughtful afterword. Together, they range from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and consider much of western Europe (with both central and northern Italy, southern and northern France, and most German-speaking lands represented). As a whole, this special issue offers an overview of how European cities developed spaces designed to control and process movement, and at the same time of how those very spaces and their strategies of use affected the social and cultural practice of mobility in the early modern period. Whether at the peripheries of the city or at their very center, whether used by wealthy townsmen, poor refugees, or triumphant princes, the spaces made for and by people on the move played a crucial role as sites of dialogue, conflict, and negotiation between urban communities and mobile individuals. As such, this special issue hopes to provide a new and fertile terrain for the study of power relations and social interactions in early modern Europe, as well as a privileged viewpoint from which to appreciate the dynamism which shaped urban life.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my co-editors, Rosa Salzberg and Pablo Gonzalez Martin, for their helpful comments on a first draft of this text.