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## Twelfth-Century London and the Influences on Its Development

by Janelle A. Jenkins

(Honors Seminar English 2220/History 2245)

The Assignment: Write an essay based on two sources from *Medieval England, 1000-1500: A Reader*. Give a brief summary of each source and show how they are interconnected.

London, England, in the twelfth-century, was magnificent and beautiful, brimming with life and enthusiasm. What were the factors that influenced its development, causing it to become magnificent and beautiful? The purpose of this paper is to explore two possible factors that combined to contribute greatly to the growth and prosperity of the city of London.

One prominent source for material about medieval London is a vivid description written about it by William Fitzstephen in the late twelfth-century. The description was included in Fitzstephen's biography of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was born in London. Fitzstephen's description points to two important factors that greatly influenced the city's development, the first being a charter granted to London by King Henry I (1100-1135) in the early twelfth-century and the second being the character of the inhabitants of London. The charter granted specific economic and governmental freedoms to the people, but the task of using those freedoms to create a prosperous city belonged to its inhabitants. These two factors will be carefully examined in order to show how King Henry's charter enabled the inhabitants of London to make their city great.

Before discussing the impact of the charter and the people in detail, a brief description of London is necessary. According to Fitzstephen, the citizens' homes were surrounded by spacious gardens, while outside the walls were pleasant meadows and wooded glades (Fitzstephen 157). The city walls were strongly fortified, and the city was further protected by castles and towers. The city's economy was well developed, and merchants sold wares from around the world. There were, Fitzstephen reports, "thirteen conventual churches, and a hundred and twenty-six lesser parochial (156)." London was the seat of the English monarchy and the episcopal see. The city's government was orderly and just and had a judicial system "for the pleading of diverse causes (Fitzstephen 159)".

The first important factor influencing the development of the city of London was the charter granted by King Henry I (1100-1135) to London in the late 1100's. This charter was addressed to English noblemen and clergymen and enumerated a variety of rights and privileges that were henceforth to belong to the inhabitants of London. First, an understanding of the general features and significance of such documents in Medieval England is essential.

Town charters were granted, not only by the king, but also by various noblemen and clergy. The recipients of these charters usually benefited in the form of release from certain taxes or tolls, fewer or no restrictions over merchant guilds, free entrance to and from their city, and greater security as they traveled in other parts of the realm. The nobleman granting the charter usually benefited from a monetary payment, as in the case of twelfth-century London ("Borough Charters" 152). He may also have hoped to gain the political support of the people in return for granting certain privileges.

This latter reason, political support, is evidenced in a clause found in many of the charters, conceding "all the liberties and laws and customs well and honorably, just as they had them best and most honorably in the time of King Edward" ("Borough Charters" 154). In order to fully understand the significance of this clause, one must understand the political climate of twelfth-century London and how it compared to the situation at the time of King Edward.

During King Edward's reign and previous to it, the Anglo-Saxon people inhabited and ruled the English lands. After King Edward's death in 1066, a dispute over his succession led to the invasion of England by William, Duke of Normandy. William triumphed at the battle of Hastings and was crowned king of England. He installed his own Norman nobles to form the English upper class, and by 1086 four thousand Anglo-Saxon thegns had been replaced by only two hundred Norman barons (Oxford Illustrated History of Britain, Gillingham 105). The Anglo-Saxon's loss of many of their former rights was one of the most significant results of the Norman invasion.

This historical background clarifies the reasoning behind the charter's reference to former liberties. By granting citizens the rights they had enjoyed during the reign of King Edward (1042-1066), the citizens were in some degree restored to their former status. This may have resulted in a greater popularity and therefore greater security for the king or nobleman issuing the charter.

The London charter, issued by King Henry I (1100-1135), granted more freedoms than the charters typically issued by noblemen or clergy. This was likely because as king, Henry had more freedoms to grant. Under the terms of the charter, he was to receive a payment of three hundred pounds. In exchange, the Londoners received release from certain customary taxes (scot, lot, and danegeld), the right to appoint a sheriff, their own judicial system, and the privilege of hunting in the forests of Chiltre, Middlesex, and Surrey, among other benefits (Charter 152). The taxes mentioned were land-based, originating primarily to pay war expenses during the Danish invasion in the ninth-century. Sheriffs were found in every shire and were responsible for keeping order in the local region, summoning persons to trial, and relating the king's commands to the people. Hunting privileges were rare at the time, as wooded areas were typically reserved for the use of the king.

The terms of this charter were generous considering the times, and one could ask why King Henry I was willing to forfeit an important source of tax revenue. Was he so desperate for any immediate supply of money that he was willing to dispense with a permanent source of income? Was his realm, which covered both England and the Norman province in France, growing too large and in need of stronger local government? Or was he seeking the support of his people as discussed previously?

Whatever his reason for granting the charter, it is clear that its impact on the city of London was profound. The charter allowed Londoners to enjoy greater financial and governmental independence than they had previously received. What the Londoners did with their new independence is clearly portrayed in the William Fitzstephen's description of the city.

As discussed in the introduction, a city is only as strong as the people who inhabit it. Just as a city's inhabitants cannot prosper under a highly restrictive government, even the most ideal government cannot ensure that the city's inhabitants will become prosperous. What was a Londoner then, and how did his or her values cause London to be the prosperous place Fitzstephen praised so highly? A close examination of their virtues will give great insight into the development of the city.

First, a Londoner was religious. As previously mentioned, the city was home to many churches, large and small, and was known for its virtuous and moral people. "I do not think there is any city deserving greater approval for its custom in respect of church-going, honor paid to the ordinances of God, keeping of feast-days, giving of alms, entertainment of strangers . . . (Fitzstephen 156)."

The inhabitants of London were also civic minded, partly because of the freedoms granted in King Henry's charter. Eager to defend and protect their city, during King Stephen's reign (1135-1154), London "sent twenty-thousand armed horsemen and sixty-thousand foot soldiers" to aid in his wars (Fitzstephen 157). A citizen of London had great respect for the law and valued honor greatly. Among them, "a solemn oath end[ed] all strife" (Fitzstephen 157). They also took great pride in their heritage. It was a common idea promoted by authors of the time that Britain had been founded by descendents of Troy, and that, therefore, the city of London pre-dated the city of Rome. This idea gave the inhabitants of London a certain prestige and promoted civic spirit.

Released from the burden of many taxes and tolls, the people of London also sought economic opportunities. Not content to continue in their current situation, they endeavored to gain prosperity through hard work and innovation. The division of labor evident in the society shows how the people were well-off, no longer needing to work just for their own food and shelter. As a result, many luxuries became available. Vendors by the river sold a vast array of fine foods. Regal horses were sold outside the city one day each week, drawing knights and other nobles as well as the citizens of the town. Merchants traveled much of the known world to bring gold, spices, weapons, silks, and furs from exotic places such as Arabia, Egypt, and China.

As the Londoners gained prosperity, they valued athletic prowess and participated in sporting events. The people enjoyed a wide variety of games and often held competitions in the fields around the city. Boys played games of ball and tested their skill at arms in tournaments. Naval competitions were also held, as a contestant stood within a boat and threw a lance, seeking to strike the target without losing his balance and falling out of the boat. Skills such as archery, ice-skating, wrestling, and hunting with falcons and dogs were also highly prized.

All of the above characteristics - religious devotion, civic responsibility, economic innovation, and physical activity - found in the inhabitants of twelfth century London had a major influence on the growth of the city. However, without the freedoms granted by King Henry's charter, the city could not have advanced as it did. It was the integration of the freedoms granted in King Henry's charter with the virtues of the Londoners that truly caused the city to prosper and grow. Both were essential to the development of the London Fitzstephen described; beautiful, prosperous, and famous.

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