In this important new book – which should be of considerable interest to the readers of this publication – Peter Fleming provides a well-researched volume which is both erudite and highly readable. Fleming states that his aim is to move away from the typical socio-economic focus of medieval urban history. Rather, he states that ‘the book is primarily an exercise in cultural history, asking what fifteenth century Bristol meant to its inhabitants’ (p. 10). Although economic and social matters remain crucial to the book’s themes, Fleming uses them to skillfully to reconstruct the ruling elite’s wider worldview. It is principally based on two key primary sources from the late fifteenth century: 1) the *Itineraries of William Worcestre*, who was born in Bristol but who moved away to study at Oxford and then entered the service of the Norfolk knight, Sir John Fastolf. Fleming argues that Worcestre’s notes on the topography of Bristol make him one of England’s first antiquarian scholars. The second source is the *Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, an important urban chronicle written by Robert Ricart, the town clerk.

Fleming situates the longstanding strengths in local history at Bristol, including the foundation of the BGAS in 1876 (one of the earliest county archaeological societies in the country), within a tradition which extends back to Worcestre and Ricart. While Fleming uses these two sources extensively, he also employs significant amounts of other materials drawn from a range of central and local archives, in addition to numerous published primary sources, to create a richly researched book which is full of colourful material. As is to be expected from Fleming, who is both a leading scholar of Bristol and of later medieval towns more widely, the book’s engagement with the wider literature on the history of Bristol and with the historiographical currents of urban history is excellent.

The book is structured around the themes of time, space and power. In the early chapters, Fleming shows how Bristol’s claim to Trojan origins – as befitted such a great town – was augmented by apparent connections to Joseph of Arimathea and St. Jordan, who was believed to be a companion of St. Augustine of Canterbury. The apparent origins of the town had an ongoing relevance to its identity during the Middle Ages and underpinned the specific privileges the ruling elite claimed in the fifteenth century. These themes are developed further in chapter three, which explores the relationship between memory and written record. Chapter four is one of the most interesting in the book and looks at Bristol’s relationship with the wider world. It argues for the possible accidental discovery of America before Columbus by Bristolians motivated by a desire for new trading opportunities to seek a legendary island called Brasil, which was believed to lie beyond the Blasket Islands off the west coast of Ireland. In any case, Bristol played an important role in the early phase of Atlantic exploration, most notably acting as the base for the voyages by Cabot. Fleming also examines alien communities residing in Bristol, amongst whom he highlights the presence of Icelanders working as servants and in the town’s important textile industry, who were likely kidnapped and sold into what was effectively slavery in England. Chapter 5 considers the town’s strong
links with Ireland, which was the principal destination for Bristol's ships in the fifteenth century. There was a strong connection with Wexford in particular, while there was a large and well-integrated Irish community in the Bristol, though it experienced increasing hostility during the fifteenth century.

Chapter six moves on to look at the topography of the town, as part of which Fleming provides an interesting walking tour through fifteenth-century Bristol which is based on the detailed topographical notes left by William Worcestre. Chapter 7 focuses on Bristol’s relationship with the crown during a turbulent period, which saw the overthrow Richard II in 1399, the loss of France and the Wars of the Roses, all of which impacted considerably on the town. These were tricky waters to navigate particularly because the municipal council’s power ultimately depended on good relations with the crown. Richard II’s 1373 grant made Bristol into a county (then the only town outside of London to enjoy this status) and gave extensive powers to the civic elite, though this did not stop the townspeople from supporting Henry IV’s seizure of the throne in 1399, probably, as Fleming argues, out of dissatisfaction that Richard was squandering the ever-increasing sums of money he demanded from them. Financial reasons also led to disenchantment with the Lancastrian monarchy which increased with the loss of Gascony in 1453 and its disastrous impact on the wine trade. A pro-Yorkist faction dominated the town during the Wars of the Roses and Bristol provided men, money and ships to the Yorkist cause (indeed, a contingent from the town fought for Edward IV at Towton in 1461). Nonetheless, with Henry VII’s victory over Richard III at Bosworth and the overthrow of the Yorkist monarchy the civic council sought to build new links with the new regime. In return for their loyalty, they received a new charter in 1499 which further augmented civic authority. As chapter 9 makes clear, the powers held by the mayor of Bristol were so extensive that in theory ‘with the sole exception of the king himself, Bristol’s mayor had no superior under God’ (p. 291). Other sources of authority were weak most notably the town’s twenty craft guilds, and in contrast to other English towns guild identity in Bristol was subsumed within a wider elite identity.

Overall, this excellent volume will appeal to those with an interest in the history of Bristol and to urban historians more widely. It is a handsomely produced volume (as is typical from Shaun Tyas) and contains a useful map of late medieval Bristol, as well as a range of colour images which include many drawn from the key primary sources used in the book.

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