The networked nature of the cities of late medieval Europe found its most clear expression in the domains of trade and banking. Some cities developed into veritable commercial empires, as epitomized by Genoa and Venice with their numerous Mediterranean trade colonies. However, a thriving commerce was not possible without production on the one hand and consumption on the other. Consequently, it should not be a surprise that many of the key cities in the late medieval European city network were also important centers of production and/or consumption.

Many of the commercial and financial capitals of Europe were among the chief centers of production. Florence, for instance, was a considerable producer of a variety of woolen and silk textiles, while Venice produced not only textiles, but also ships, glass, mirrors, and various other luxury goods. However, unlike Florence or Venice, many production centers did not have a strong internationally oriented commercial sector for marketing their products abroad. Instead, their goods were exported through a gateway city that formed the link between the production region and the larger trade network. The textiles produced in the industrial cities and towns of Flanders (for

The Lombard textile industries between 1350 and 1550

With the exception of the southern Low Countries, north-central Italy was the most important textile-producing region of late medieval Europe. In Lombardy, export-oriented textile production was not limited to its capital Milan, but was dispersed across various cities and towns. Each of these was specialized in the production of one or more particular varieties of linens, fustians, or woolen cloths. A polycentric city-region developed, whereby the bigger cities offered specialized commercial skills and services linking the various industries in the smaller towns to regional and international markets. Similar developments could be observed in other highly urbanized industrial regions including the Low Countries and Swabia.

Source: Epstein (2000)
example Ghent, Ypres, Kortrijk) were exported through Bruges, while the yields of the silver- and copper-mining towns of central Europe (Banská Bystrica, Schwaz, Kutná Hora) passed through gateways such as Nuremberg and Augsburg. Moreover, production was not limited to the big cities: the development of proto-industries in rural and small town settlements was a significant characteristic of the late medieval economy of Europe.

The principal consumption centers of late medieval Europe were the capital cities, where royal and princely courts were significant consumers of luxury goods of all kinds. Moreover, capital cities attracted large numbers of servants, administrators, noblemen, artists, craftsmen, merchants, bankers, and a variety of other people who resided at or worked for the court. As a result, capital cities—such as Paris, London, Venice, Naples, and Prague—were among the biggest cities of late medieval Europe, and these concentrations of population generated particularly high levels of consumption.

The networked cities of late medieval Europe could therefore incorporate a variety of different functions: production, consumption, commerce, education, administration, etc. Sometimes these functions were concentrated in a single metropolis. Sometimes, however, they were dispersed across a number of cities within a region, each with its own specialization. Such regions consisting of one or more industrial cities, commercial gateways, and consumption centers in various constellations, with different cities fulfilling different but complementary functions, can be characterized as polycentric city-regions. Like polycentric metropolises today, these multinodal regions constituted dynamic networks on their own, which on a higher level were linked into the overarching city network.